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WE FOUGHT THEM
IN GUNBOATS



ROBERT HICHENS

LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER
ROBERT PEVERELL

HICHENS

D.S.O., D.S.C., R.N.V.R.

We Fought them in Gunboats

with a Foreword by

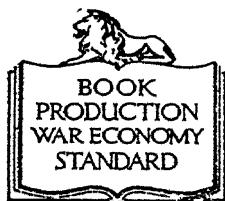
REAR-ADMIRAL

HUGH HEXT ROGERS, M.V.O., O.B.E.



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THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN COMPLETE
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FOREWORD BY
REAR-ADMIRAL HUGH HEXT ROGERS
M.V.O., O.B.E.

IT IS A LITTLE DIFFICULT for a wholly illiterate Naval Officer, who was at sea as a midshipman before he was fifteen, to write a foreword to a book. But I am proud to be able to write something of an appreciation of the writer of this book.

When I came to the Sub-Command in February 1942 it was a pleasure to find that one of the most distinguished of many gallant officers serving there was Lieutenant-Commander Hichens, R.N.V.R., a Cornishman as I am, married to a cousin of mine, partnered to my family's solicitor in a firm started by my grandfather. No one who met him casually could realize that he was a great man in action; he had quiet ways and a quiet voice; he looked quiet, but he had developed a cold courage that took a lot of beating. He always remembered his object, and in the heat of action he could size up a situation and calculate the odds as well as any officer of his own age trained up to the Navy from boyhood. He was also a lover of the sea and a lover of speed, and these two things count for a great deal. He hardly ever made a mistake in action and he took on unbelievable odds—the night when, with one lagging companion, he drove six heavily armed E-boats from the convoy route is one example—and when he came back he was able to write clear reports, which is a great help to his Senior Officers. Some of these reports were masterpieces, especially when he wanted to tell the whole truth without giving away one of his team who had not done as well as he should, and whom he preferred to put on the right lines in his own way. He had a keen eye for detail, and a grasp of technical matters, which will do much for Coastal Forces in the future. So many improvements came from his own brain, and to him, seemed to come into action so slowly, for he had a love of per-

fection, and was always impatient to get it now, and not next month, or next year. He could have left the sea, he could have got promotion, but not in the job he loved and where he thought his duty lay, and so he made the sacrifice so many of our best and most gallant young men have made.

His death cut his book short; it is unfinished, and cannot tell the tale, in his own words, how, not long before he died, he and his little ships, close to the enemy coast, fired on from all sides, blinded in a rainbow of tracer and star shell, quietly stopped and picked out of the water as many as they could get of the crew of a blazing gunboat, and only left them when they were all in imminent danger of sharing the fate of the one unlucky one. It was some consolation afterwards to learn from a German broadcast that the Commanding Officer and others had been picked up; but it was typical of Hitchens, when he came back, to say to his Captain that he did not think it was right to recommend him for an award, as he realized he should not have taken so great risks with so many valuable craft and trained men, just for their friends.

Those who knew him intimately will regret that he was unable to revise and complete this book for publication. It also suffers under the inevitable wartime censorship. We know of so much that might have been there and isn't; but it gives a grand picture of what happens in the little ships, and it is good to know that there are many young men left alive in England today who have inherited the spirit of "Hitch," and who will, I pray, *this* time see that the world steers a better course, when old men like me are lying under the long grass of a churchyard or under the sea ruminating on our misdeeds since 1918.

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“To the cause that lacked assistance,
To the wrong that needs resistance,
To the triumphs in the distance,
To the good that we can do.”

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To the
R. N. V. R.
and
“*Hostilities Only*” *Crews*



C H A P T E R

I

IT WAS AN AUTUMN NIGHT at a Coastal Force base, H.M.S. *Beehive*. There was an early moon with a flat, calm, glassy winter's night. An ideal night for E-boats.

Rain or sun, cold or heat meant little to us. The weather was divided into operational or un-operational conditions. To-night these were perfect.

The 6th Motor Gun Boat Flotilla had been working hard. Still recovering from a holocaust of boats due to an air-sea rescue trip in late August in a hard wind, there were only four boats out of the eight operating at the time. These boats were well-armed, had a high speed and made a hell of a noise. Our job was to cover, or try to cover, the East Coast convoy route.

The boats had been working hard in the recent calm weather and were standing by on this night, at short notice, ready to move at once if E-boats came over. Moreover, we were being held for a special job scheduled for the following night.

It was a little after eleven o'clock when the telephone went in S.O.O's.* office. "E-boats operating on the convoy route. A unit of the 6th Flotilla to proceed forthwith to intercept."

I shall explain something of our difficulties later on. It is enough to say here that making contact with small fast craft in the comparative vastness of the North Sea at night, when as a rule they would not be visible further than five hundred yards, is a difficult task. Such was our job as E-boat hunters.

Three boats made up the unit. Mine was the flotilla leader. The other two were under the command of Lieutenant L. G. R. Campbell, R.N.V.R., otherwise known as "Boffin," and Lieutenant G. E. Bailey, R.N.V.R., or "George."

* Staff officer (operations).

Boffin, though thirty-three at the time, a year older than I, had been my first lieutenant for the past nine months. We had been through our preliminary courses together, and as he had no previous sea experience, he had to be a Number One to begin with. He had just taken over his new boat; this was his first operation as a C.O.* As things turned out, it was lucky that he had been with me so long and knew all our little ways. Boffin is a fire-eater. Hates the Germans and nothing gives him greater pleasure than killing them. Rather slow to learn, but extremely sure, he became the best station-keeper in the flotilla and one could be certain that Boffin was on one's tail, if no one else. Very comforting it was at times, too. Red-faced and rather bluff in speech and appearance, he always gave the impression of just having had a most satisfying meal; he generally had. Consequently he was always being accused of having high blood pressure, which never failed to secure a rise and an indignant denial. But it was for his acquisitive habits that he was most justly famous, and more of that presently.

George Bailey (or Beeley of Beehive as he was called, having been overheard answering the phone in his slightly Scottish accent by this rather high-sounding title) is dark, with an india-rubber countenance and a great flair for making everyone laugh. He also at the time had not long been in command of his boat and had had uncommon bad luck with engine failures at unfortunate moments.

To complete the introduction of officers going to sea in these boats, Bailey's first lieutenant was a young Etonian called David James, also Scottish, from the Isle of Mull. He was a seaman by nature who had sailed before the mast in square rig before going to Oxford, and who found it impossible to feel the slightest qualm however disturbing the motion. A devotee of the ballet, with a surprisingly active mind, he was quite incapable of noticing if he had a large smudge of ink on his face, or had rent the seat of his trousers.

Boffin's No. 1 was old Joe Harrison, an elderly Australian officer, probably the oldest officer in fast boats; no one ever quite knew how he got there. But Joe was tough, and though badly seasick at first in these little boats, was always spoiling for a fight.

* Commanding officer.

Francis Head was my new No. 1. Tall and dark, if not exactly handsome, very nearly so. He turned out to be God's gift to the elderly C.O. such as myself, in that he was a highly trained signalman, having been "bunts" in a cruiser before he got his commission. He could read flashing if it was humanly possible.

Finally there were two midshipmen, who were training with us, and myself, a somewhat bald-headed solicitor of thirty-two. A solicitor, a tea-planter, and an insurance agent, rather like "the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker," but instead of putting to sea in a tub, we were setting sail in highly complicated motor gunboats.

The water of the harbour, still as ice, looked black and sinister. Everything was quiet, the boats like somnolent leviathans in the half moonlight, half-opaque shadows thrown by the sheds and cranes along the dock-sides. No sound except the smothered tinkle of a radio from one of the hulls.

With alarm given, noise rises in a crescendo. At first only the clatter of the few duty hands roused aboard, the slamming of hatches, the muttering of sleepy curses. Then the sound of running feet as the crews arrive. The first lieutenants can be heard giving orders. "Clear away those springs—jump to it." "Uncover guns." Until a tremendous roar, followed by another and then another, shatters all hope of speech as the powerful engines bang into life in turn, and cough their poisonous gases into the confined quarters of the dock, until the whole air is athrob and it is impossible to hear a man speak unless he yells in your ear. Then the hurly-burly of departure begins. The C.Os. get their orders and any parting instructions and admonitions. They come aboard and on go the navigation lights. The Senior Officer hopes that everyone is ready, because in the prevailing din it is very difficult to make sure. The first hull slips out seaward.

"Let go." "Ahead port." "Port wheel." "Ahead starboard." "Midships." "Steady."

In an unhurried even sequence the orders are given for getting away, almost invariably the same. Slowly at first the unit forms into line ahead making for the boom gate, their dim navigation lights like creeping glow-worms. The boom is reached; "We're at

the boom No. 1. What's the first course?" Two sparks of light come from the leader, the throttles are lifted. The spray flies away broad from the bow as the fore-foot lifts and the boat begins to plane; the noise from the engines settles to a steady roar. The unit is at sea.

In this particular night we were lucky in our weather, but not in our reliability. When we had barely left harbour Bailey's boat flashed the signal for a breakdown in main engines. The trouble proved to be an excessive quantity of water in the carburettor and filters of the starboard engine. Several attempts were made to clear it, but we could not afford much time, so regretfully Bailey had to be left behind. The remaining two boats went on at cruising speed, crossed the convoy route, and set a course direct for the open sea.

The time was now about midnight, the moon still up, the sea flat calm. In such conditions motor gunboating can be sheer joy. Station-keeping is easy; the boats seem to fly along with a tremendous sense of speed. They are very beautiful.

I think one of the most lovely sights I have ever seen is a gunboat unit at speed in moonlight, with the white pluming wakes, the cascading bow waves, the thin black outlines of the guns starkly silhouetted, the figures of the gunners motionless at their positions as though carved out of black rock, all against the beautiful setting of the moon-path on the water.

Upon this occasion, the satisfactory sense of well-being induced by these ideal conditions was rudely disturbed by the smell of burning, always alarming at sea, pressing now, the pungent smell of hot rubber. This was immediately followed by the apparition of my motor mechanic, like a cheerful genie. He was a most admirable person named Stay (Vic to his friends), whose appearance was invariably the prelude to a beaming smile, and the remark "Everything on top line, sir." You only need to be a gunboat officer for a week to know that this is the most desirable quality a motor mechanic can have. So many report with an overcast countenance and the statement that the vibration is awful. Now Vic was forced to admit that all was not well, that the horrid smell was due to a "pendulastic going." This rather fantastic

word represents another source of tribulation to a gunboat officer; it is the coupling between the engine and the gear box, which has an awkward habit of packing up on inconvenient occasions. The pendulastic on one of my engines was now running true to form at this critical moment in the history of motor gunboating. We were forced to stop. Meanwhile, the telegraphist had been receiving and passing up a stream of E-boat reports. It was obvious that E-boats were on the convoy route in large numbers, and the night was perfect. Should I go on? It was very tempting; but there were grave objections. We could now only do 18 knots and we were a long way from the scene of action. Moreover, we were required to be in readiness for an important job far afield the next night, and if I carried on for hours with one engine out there was a considerable possibility of damage. On the other hand there were the enemy in large numbers. It was a difficult decision, the sort that is often presenting itself to naval officers in some guise or another.

I knew what I wanted to do; it's not every officer who is lucky enough to have a Stay at hand ready to salve his conscience: I consulted him. "We've a long way to go, but it looks as though it would be well worth trying. How do you think she'll do for six or eight hours?"

"She'll be all right, sir. I'll keep a good eye on them, let you know at once if any sign of trouble develops."

It was settled. We went on. The little hand lamp flashed white. The peace of the night at sea was rent by the throaty roar of engines. The lamp sparked again twice, the boats slid away.

We were roughly over the outer Gabbard Bank. I decided to move to a position to seaward of the area in which the E-boats were operating on the convoy route, in a direct line to the Dutch coast.

"Steer north 48° east."

"North 48° east, sir."

My coxswain, Curtis, had been with me for nearly a year, and he was an expert at steadying a gunboat on her course, even in bumpy weather; a difficult art. When the boat bangs, the compass flies around. If you follow it the boat begins to swing violently,

and your wake looks like a tremendous series of S's. It requires great skill and restraint to leave the compass to swing and yet keep your average course correct. To-night Curtis had no difficulty.

"Steady on north 48° east, sir."

We were doing 18 knots now. I calculated anxiously how many hours it would take to reach the chosen position.

"How far is it, Head?"

There was a muffled sound from the wheelhouse, a pause while he consulted the chart, then a face appeared in the little doorway leading from the wheelhouse to the "dustbin," and a voice shouted:

"Forty-three miles, sir."

Just over two hours. Well, we should see how she settled down to her job. I checked the compass course, looked round to see that Campbell was close on the starboard quarter, noted that the moon was beginning to get low, that the visibility was decreasing. A slight mist was beginning to form low over the water, often the case in very quiet weather. We got more reports of E-boats. Evidently they were moving a bit further north. Was my position going to be the best guess?

There were probably two groups out working. I wondered in what strength they were, as I helped myself to a bull's-eye and handed one to Head. "Antsie's comfits," I called them. Antony was my younger son, at that time aged five. He used to prepare a little bag of his sweets for me every time I was going to sea, and very comforting they were.

Probably six in each group, I thought; they usually work in sixes.

"I wish to God we could catch those bastards to-night," I said to Head.

"Just the night for a battle, except for our 18 knots, and we've got the place to ourselves," he replied.

We were the only patrol well off the convoy route.

"It's nice to know you can hit anyone at sight," I said.

The moon was going rapidly and with its departure the mist was thickening.

"Shan't see much soon. It'll be damned difficult to spot them," observed Head.

"We shouldn't see them much more than half a cable, or a cable at the most, but it's a lovely night for hearing them," I replied. "The only thing to do is to cut, and hope to hear them returning.

"There seem to be plenty out to-night," said Head presently, when further signals had been passed up giving more positions of E-boats. "They seem to be all on the convoy route, at least one destroyer has flushed some of them already, and had a crack at them."

"Yes, I think the position we've chosen is the best; nip down to the engineroom, and see if they're all happy."

There was a short pause, followed by the appearance of Stay, looking somewhat dishevelled, but cheerful.

"Everything on top line, sir! They're taking it perfectly."

"No signs of trouble?"

"No, sir."

"They sound all right. They'll have about six more hours to do at any rate, even if we make no contact."

"They'll be O.K., sir."

Thus encouraged I settled back into the normal state of watchfulness, accompanied by a rather blank mind, that seems the least tiring method of passing the long hours under way—often as many as ten or fifteen on end. The continuous peering into an unending depth of darkness seems to shroud the mind and keep it in a state of suspended animation, which may go on for hours, until brought back to sudden and intense activity by some alteration in the apparently interminable sameness of the conditions. A real or imagined shape looms into view, a light blinks in the distance or from your companions, a signal is shouted into your ear, that continuous deadening roar of the engines changes its note infinitesimally. The suspended animation is gone, you are thinking fast.

If nothing occurs to distract attention, the one thought that keeps recurring is: "How much longer?"

"How much longer, Head?"

A short pause, then :

"Fifteen and a half minutes, sir."

Half minutes matter at high speed. Though we were doing only 18 knots, the habit of accuracy was there.

Watchfulness and suspended animation again.

"Two minutes to go, sir."

"Right, let me know when there's thirty seconds."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Thirty seconds to go, sir."

I signalled to the other boat. We slowed down.

There was the flip of the revs. as the engines came out of gear, then silence as the order to cut engines was obeyed.

What a relief that silence is after the hours of noise. Together with the silence comes relaxation from the tension imposed by the ample warning of the enemy's approach in such an exquisite absence of noise, though this may well not be the case. On such a quiet night as this, every sound comes clearly; the dull thud of a hatch banging closed in a nearby ship, a deep laugh, a muffled shout from the engine-room. On this occasion, a call from Boffin :

"How is she going?"

"Seems all right. What revs were you doing?" I shouted back.

His answer confirmed our estimated speed.

"I think this is the best place to hope for an interception," I said.

"I should think so. There seem to be a hell of a lot out to-night," said Boffin.

"I wish the visibility wasn't quite so low."

It was now after two o'clock in the morning; reports of E-boat activity were still coming in from the convoy route. That meant that we were not likely to have our chance of catching the enemy on their way home for at least another hour or two. We settled down to our usual listening vigil.

All was quiet. At 0330 I went below for a doze and left Head on watch. The reports had died down, which meant that the E-boats had left the convoy route. If we were to have any luck, we should hear something before long. Head was to rouse me at the first sound. I reckoned our zero hour was between 0430 and 0500.

At a quarter to five Head shook me.

"Distant sound of engines, sir, bearing about west."

A tremendous moment! Were we at last to have our chance?

I was on deck in a few seconds; sure enough there was just the faintest murmur away to the westward.

The night was absolutely still. Not the gentlest catpaw to stir the water, not the faintest sound to break the absolute silence, except that distant murmur. At long last, music to our ears! Had we not flogged the ocean for nearly a year and never succeeded in engaging them fairly and squarely?

The faint rumble was increasing—yes, music to our ears. But 18 knots, and in that visibility! How could we hope to do it? Was the exhilaration to turn to bitter disappointment again, because it was misty and we had only 18 knots? Probably so.

Head was watching the compass.

"Bearing's about west-south-west now, sir, getting louder."

"E-boats all right, they're moving east. We'll have to wait a bit to get some accurate idea of course and speed from the change of bearing. I'll plot it. The bearing was due west as near as no matter when you first heard it, wasn't it?"

"Yes, west, sir."

A pause:

"Lucky we picked them up well to the westward. It's given us a chance to head them off. Damn the 18 knots. We want our full speed."

"Perhaps we shall have some luck," I said. "It's time we did." We did.

The murmur had grown to a rumble, then to a deep growl. It was eerie, very thrilling to peer into that impenetrable dark, to hear the deep thudding mutter grow stronger, more vibrant, knowing that it was our mortal foes approaching, all unconscious of us lurking in their path. In their path? Well, in a manner of speaking! But the North Sea is wide, the night very dark and misty. There is many a slip 'twixt the sound and the ship. "In their path" would have to mean that they would pass us within one hundred yards, and they were well to the south. How far away were those exhausts, drumming so insistently and tantalizingly in

our ears, and how many of them? How many didn't matter, how far did. Was it six miles, or three? It was hard to tell in the absolute stillness.

"They're bearing about south 50° west now, sir."

Head was again at the compass.

"Yes, what's the time?"

"0553."

"That means we've heard them for eight minutes. I'll plot them allowing 27 knots; that'll be nearly four miles."

By this time all hands, though not yet called upon, were at action stations, listening silently, intently, peering into the darkness. So near and yet so far. It was a great moment for me, my first chance of contact with the enemy as S.O.* of the flotilla. Could we do it with 18 knots? That was the query that pounded in my head as the precious minutes slid by and I pored over the chart. Well, I couldn't risk waiting longer to check their course, or I wouldn't have a hope; another six minutes and we should be on the beam of their line of advance.

One last look at the rough plot, so much a matter of guess work, and I had made up my mind.

"Start up. South 25° east, coxswain."

The engines roared. The little dimmed blue light flicked, we didn't want any chance of them seeing a flash. We were off, Boffin's boat creaming along close on the starboard quarter.

"Steady on south 25° east, sir."

The minutes went on. Our 18 knots seemed a paltry crawl. How were they bearing? No good asking in that crashing uproar. You couldn't see them until you nearly rammed them; you could hear nothing except your own infernal uproar. But how *were* they bearing? I must know. It would be one chance in a thousand to have hit off an interception to one hundred yards on the rough estimate of course speed and distance judged while listening to their approach. How to get another bearing to check our intercepting course?

We stopped to listen. The blue lamp flashed, the throttles were slammed down; Boffin, taken aback by the unusual violence of

* Senior officer.

our deceleration, surged up level and stopped too. Time was vital. Stopping to listen was the only solution. It had the disadvantage of still jeopardizing our chances of cutting them off with our slow speed.

The immediate insistent roar of our own engines subsided quickly, there to the southward was the distant deeper throb like a malignant echo. It was much louder now.

I looked anxiously at the compass. Was the bearing the same as when we had started up? If so, our course was accurate.

It had altered a little to the eastward. That meant we were losing bearing on them, only slightly though. If we altered to the east a bit, it might be all right, they were clearly very much closer.

"Start up. South 50° east."

"South 50° east, sir."

The crash of the starting engines, so loud it seemed they must hear us, and we were off again.

"Steady on south 50° east, sir."

"Two and a half minutes between courses, sir."

"Not bad at all; we shall have to get it quicker. We must be getting close to them now."

Seconds went by. Should I stop again? It would mean that we had missed them unless we made contact in the next two or three minutes. To stop meant the loss of precious time. If they once got ahead with our 18 knots we could never catch them. Should I stop?

"Flashing light on the port bow, sir."

Yes, there it was, a little blue light winking quite close to port, then the faint outline of a hull in the mist. Though I knew E-boats were very close, I must identify before attacking. I flashed the challenge. The reply, faintly made, was indecisive. Then suddenly we could see five E-boats, long, low, white-painted hulls, clustered together, almost stopped, or moving very slowly, obviously rendezvousing.

Four were disposed in a close group to port, the fifth being a little further off, and almost in our course.

It had been but ten seconds from their first flash. We had got them—our first big chance.

"Hard aport, coxswain," I yelled, as the guns crashed out to port and starboard, engaging the boat ahead (now to starboard), and the boat that had challenged us. Boffin kept magnificently on our quarter, pumping shells into the starboard E-boat—now only 50 or 60 yards away—with all he'd got.

The E-boat to port was only the same distance off and receiving severe punishment from our guns. You could see the shells exploding on her side and upperworks. As yet the Germans had hardly realized what had happened. I could imagine the confusion on board as guns were hastily manned, with men falling wounded and officers shouting orders. A third E-boat loomed up right ahead, moving slowly to port across our bow.

"Port wheel."

"Port wheel, sir."

The coxswain was wonderfully calm. We drew out parallel to this boat, and Boffin, slightly to starboard, couldn't have been more than twenty yards from her. We gave her the most tremendous broadside as we went past and turned to starboard across her bow.

She did not reply. It is doubtful if any of her deck personnel survived that blast at short range.

By this time the enemy had recovered themselves somewhat. The E-boats further away were firing fiercely, some of it hitting us, most whining just past us. As they began to gather way their fire increased, became more confused; brilliant bouts of tracer splitting the darkness in every direction.

Coming round to starboard, we could see a fourth boat about a hundred yards away gathering speed, heading the way we were going. This boat had probably been unhit as yet, and the exchange of fire at that range was brisk. Part of the stand was blown from beneath one of our gunner's feet, a gun was smashed and put completely out of action. Still nearly all of it was just missing us, and, best of all, no one was badly hit, an incredible bit of luck.

It is hard to describe the confusion of such an engagement. The pitch darkness, the swift-moving hulls, lost to sight almost as soon as seen, the brilliant stream of light from the tracer criss-crossing like comets in every direction; above all, the incessant

noise. The nearby ear-splitting crack of our own guns, blending into the more distant gunfire and roar of the engines.

The E-boat turned hard away to the starboard with a fire starting aft, giving great promise, but seeming to blot out suddenly.

"Hard-a-starboard."

"Hard-a-starboard, sir," from the imperturbable Curtis.

"Midships." I had forgotten the faithful Boffin, who, still close on the starboard quarter, had found this sudden turn too much for him and was riding up into us. We made the turn more gently, sweeping in a wide circle back to the position in which we had found the E-boats originally.

They had all scattered. Which way to try?

I supposed the general disengaging direction would be to the south-eastwards, towards the Dutch coast. We steadied in this direction, peering intently into the misty darkness for the first sign of a hull.

Although we had suffered no severe casualties, by this time we were in poor shape as a fighting gunboat. Our starboard gun had been completely knocked out, another gun was badly jammed, and Edwards, the gunner, was desperately working to clear it. We had nothing with which to engage on the starboard side except a stripped Lewis, a hand-controlled .303 weapon. As leading boat, we had attracted almost all the effective fire. Boffin was unscathed, with all his guns still working.

Suddenly we saw a misty shape to starboard. It was an E-boat on approximately the same course as ourselves. I roared aft, in the hope that Edwards had cleared the jammed gun; nothing happened. The sense of frustration that I experienced at this moment is one of the liveliest and most vivid memories of my life. After a year's search for the elusive E-boat, to have one ranging nearer and nearer alongside at point-blank range, to be unable to fire anything at her except a rifle bullet was utterly exasperating. Besides, one had the uncomfortable feeling that at any moment there would be a hail of 20 mm. shells from her, which could hardly fail to hit, with no return fire to keep her gunners jumping. The E-boat was strangely silent, perhaps she had not seen us yet, or hoped that she had not been seen. I yelled at the gunner with

the stripped Lewis to fire. There was a sharp crackle and a stream of bright white tracer went tearing straight into the E-boat, by this time no more than a hundred yards on our starboard beam.

Things happened quickly. Boffin evidently had not seen the enemy until the Lewis gun opened up. He let fly with everything; the E-boat, stung into violent activity, fired back wildly, turned hard to starboard and opened up to full speed. In a minute she was out of sight. With 18 knots we could do nothing.

We went on south-east. What to do next? How to find them again? We had given them a good deal to go on with. Before our gun jammed we had scored several hits at close range before the enemy started firing. Boffin had done likewise. Those E-boats would not forget us in a hurry; we were shortly to have proof of this.

After proceeding for a few minutes, I decided that the only thing to do was to stop and listen again to see if we could get a bearing by ear of the enemy's movements.

We stopped. Again, the sense of relief from tension, from the ear-splitting racket to which we had just been subjected. At last there was a moment to think without distraction. We listened intently. The silence seemed complete. A further relaxation from tension; there was no enemy near at hand. I jumped up on to the canopy.

"Any casualties, Head?"

"Nothing serious, sir. Edwards has a splinter in his leg, it's only a scratch, and Taylor has been scratched too; it's nothing."

Taylor was the starboard gunner.

"We're lucky," I said. "Check up for any damage below decks."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Are you all right, Boffin?" I yelled.

"Yes, quite," came the reply. "No casualties, no serious damage. I bet the E-boats aren't."

"Yes," I yelled back.

"We must have given them a bad time in that first five minutes. Expect they thought we were another E-boat and were all sucking a cup of tea. Probably thought it most unfriendly."

"Wonder where they've gone to? One or two of them might find it hard to get home," added Boffin.

"I'll send an amplifying signal and suggest fighters go and deal with the stragglers when it gets light."

It was about 0545 by this time; still pitch dark.

We had sent an immediate enemy report on turning in to engage, simply reporting our position and saying that we were engaging. I now sent a further signal saying that we had attacked five E-boats, two of which were seriously damaged, and as we had lost contact, I also asked that fighter aircraft should carry out a search as soon as possible.

Telegraphists in these boats lead a hard existence—very lengthy periods of watch in a tiny W/T* cabin. I had an exceptionally able Scottish leading telegraphist named Roberts. Besides being a good tel. he was a good fighter; he was always to be found trying out the guns. His greatest pleasure was to send off such a signal as this.

As he put it:

"For once we're somebody and they're listening. They're stopping the other traffic to get us."

Most gratifying to a telegraphist's self-esteem.

Head had reported several shell holes in the hull, nothing serious.

I was beginning to wonder what the next move was to be, when the coxswain said:

"Do you think you hear something, sir, over there?" pointing to the south-west.

I told everyone to be quiet and listened. Very, very faintly one seemed to hear a low muttering, or was it imagination? Vividly there came to my mind the scene more than two years before in the surgery at King Alfred, when the doctor had suddenly ceased to listen to my heart and had put his mouth to my ear and made the most inaudible of sounds. For a moment I had not been able to think what he was at. The reason was clear now.

"Do you hear anything, Boffin?" I shouted.

"Yes, I think so, to the south-west. Not very certain, though."

"I think so, too. Let's go and see."

* Wireless telegraph.

The engines roared into life. We swung round to south-west and steadied. Feelings of intense exhilaration were shot through with pangs of apprehension, hard to keep completely subdued. Edwards had not yet been able to clear the gun. A round had got hopelessly jammed up the barrel; he had the gun in pieces at the moment. Were we to light upon a re-formed and thoroughly aroused pack of E-boats? If so, we weren't going to be so lucky. However, we might find a gash* one: the gunboat officer's dream!

The first preliminaries of dawn were beginning to have a faint effect upon the hitherto intense darkness. For no apparent reason there seemed to be a little more light; the mist was thinning. We had been going for about fifteen minutes when suddenly, very dramatically, we saw a low hull lying black and lifeless in the water, a cable on the starboard bow.

"Vessel bearing green 45, sir," came in a shout from the shattered starboard turret position, and in less correct phraseology from aft, but with no less anticipation:

"There's one of the bloody bastards!"

I wondered what her silence could mean. Were her crew completely cowed, or had they no guns left firing? They couldn't be all killed. Anyway we must board, but we must be careful as they might be laying a trap for us.

I sent a signal that one of the enemy had stopped and I intended to board her. I also requested that assistance should be sent.

Suddenly Boffin roared out of the gloom. I flashed him to slow and stop, and was greeted with a burst of Lewis gun fire. Evidently some gunner, excited by the night's events and too easy on the trigger. Slowing quickly she stopped. The roar of engines ceased; I could hear the unfortunate gunner still receiving the full benefit of Boffin's tongue.

The E-boat was lying two hundred yards to the eastward, black and silent.

The first of the dawn was by this time taking effect. She was clearly silhouetted against the growing light in the eastern sky. The moment was exhilarating in the extreme.

* "Gash": used as a noun denotes waste or something fit only to be thrown away; as an adjective, broken down, of no further use.

"We must board," I shouted.

So in the early glimmering light on that calm and peaceful sea we made our preparations. She was obviously hopelessly crippled; there was no fear of her suddenly departing. It was, therefore, worth taking what precautions we could. We got all our tommy-guns and revolvers, we arranged to approach one on either side, with Boffin to starboard, in such a way that we should not fire straight across the E-boat at each other. All guns were to be trained on and used to the full if she showed the slightest signs of fight. Boffin was to use his searchlight, one of the midshipmen who could speak German was to hail the enemy, calling upon them to surrender.

Everything was understood.

"Start up."

The order was given, the silence shattered. Slowly the gunboats closed on their prey, the engines throbbing, the guns trained, every man strung up with excitement.

No sign from the E-boat. The light was making steadily, but it wasn't enough yet to see any details on the enemy's decks. Were we to get a withering blast at the last minute, or what were the Germans up to?

Fifty yards, twenty-five yards. Still no sign.

"Do you surrender?" The midshipman's voice carried ringingly over the quiet sea. No answer.

This was passing strange. A brilliant finger of light shot out from Boffin's boat, played on the decks of the E-boat. A deserted shambles. Bullet holes everywhere, gear lying about, no signs of life; at the yardarm of her diminutive mast the ugly German naval flag with the swastika and the iron cross hung lifeless in the still air.

Was it an ambush? Were there men hidden, guns trained, waiting until they could not miss, for one last desperate stand? It was impossible to tell in the grey dawn. The hard light and dark shadows thrown by the searchlight was no better.

"Ahead port."

"Starboard wheel."

"Steady."

"We'll come alongside port side," to Head.

"Aye, aye, sir."

"You will lead the boarding party. Shoot at sight if there is any opposition."

The last orders were given, the last dispositions made. Slowly we edged alongside.

"Stop port."

Head jumped for it while still a foot or two off. There was a crash of gunfire.

"Christ, they were there after all."

Then I realized it was our own gun, put together again now, ripping across the decks of the E-boat. Edwards had tripped over the firing stand where it had been shattered; in so doing he had pulled the trigger. The shells had gone perilously close in front of Head.

He jumped aboard, made straight for the Nazi ensign, and lowered it forthwith. My boat was made fast alongside. Boffin's quickly joined her.

At once we realized what had happened. It seemed incredible we had not guessed it before.

The German crew had been taken off by another E-boat. They had heard us coming while they were in the process of scuttling the boat, and had beaten a very hasty retreat.

Leaving a few hands on the gunboats, much to their chagrin and loudly sucking their teeth, the rest swarmed aboard the E-boat. A motor mechanic was detailed to report on the engine-room, and see if there was any chance of closing the seacocks.

Head, who had gone on to enter the wheelhouse, reported a destruction charge laid down the companion way from the wheelhouse, the charge at the foot of the ladder. Everyone was kept back. The midshipman and I approached the charge. There was the fuse line leading down the ladder, with a peculiar wooden handle at the firing end. Had it been lit? Well it must be a long fuse if it was; the Germans had left some fifteen minutes ago at least.

Then the midshipman saw on the handle the words in German: "Remove handle to fire."

Without more ado he picked up the charge and threw it overboard. There are advantages in knowing the enemy tongue!

Meanwhile it was obvious we could not save the boat without help. The engine room was full of water and diesel oil, the water-levels were rising fast in other compartments. It was impossible to get at the sea-cocks to close them.

I sent a signal asking for towing assistance and a pump, inwardly doubting whether anything could arrive in time. It was exasperating.

"Bring them back alive," had been the orders, but heavy as she was with water, it was impossible to tow; we should merely have ruined our engines. Lacking a power pump there was no hope of keeping her afloat unless assistance arrived within the hour. I doubted if she would last longer.

The order was given to gut the boat. Sailors swarmed all over her, appearing from all the hatches with arms full of equipment. Roberts removed all the W/T equipment, gunners took what guns they could detach and pans of ammunition. Charts, books, logs, compasses, searchlights, revolvers, even pictures of Hitler were bundled into the gunboats. Someone came up waving a long German sausage. They had found it all spread out, half-eaten, on the messdeck table for'ard; sausage, black bread, sauerkraut. A confirmation of my earlier prediction that they had been "sucking a cup of tea."

She began to settle by the stern. She was wallowing, very heavy, now. With men everywhere below, I had to consider very carefully how long I could hold on, at the same time trying to make a mental note of all the important features of the boat.

A particularly unpleasant wallow accompanied by a downward lurch aft decided me. Smoke was coming from the smoke apparatus where the decks were awash, water was swishing through a large crack in the deck. Only forward was it possible to get below.

"Abandon the E-boat. Get back to your boats."

The order was quickly though reluctantly obeyed. We let go and stood off fifty yards to watch her end.

Roberts came up to me with a request to take the dinghy and have a last attempt to get some more gear that had so far resisted

his endeavours. Barnes, the port gunner, volunteered to go with him. I agreed, provided one stayed near the hatch to listen for a warning shout. The dinghy was lowered, they rowed off to the E-boat and disappeared below. Still they worked on. Suddenly she gave a sickening lurch downward by the stern. A cry of warning went up, quickly Roberts and Barnes reappeared and jumped into the boat.

Only just in time! She was going rapidly by the stern. Her bows were lifting, lifting, until for a few seconds she hung vertical, her stern under water, her bows pointed upwards, as if in supplication to the sky. Then quickly she sank and disappeared from view.

A cheer went up, but it was a feeble one. There is something awe-inspiring and a little saddening about the sight of any ship, however small, however much hated, going down. It is so very irrevocable; in its setting of apparently limitless water, impressive.

Somehow, with the passing of the boat, there was a relaxation of tension. We had been through an exciting three hours since we first heard the enemy. The ludicrous sight of one of the crew falling in while getting the dinghy aboard was hailed with shouts of delight.

We got under way and headed for home. We reported the sinking of the E-boat. Two M.Ls.* sent to our assistance with special pumps turned back.

We ploughed on in a state of blissful reaction.

There is no feeling so good as that experienced after a successful engagement, if you have been lucky enough to escape casualties; the only comparable experience that I have had is paddling back after a win in a racing eight, or cruising round to your pit after getting the chequered flag in a motor race; even these glorious moments do not come up to it. Unfortunately these feelings are generally marred by concern and sorrow over casualties.

In this case there was nothing to spoil our pleasure; it was our first real fight, it was perhaps excusable.

As we reached the convoy route we met the destroyers returning to harbour. They had had engagement with E-boats too, had received our signals, were interested to hear what had happened.

* Motor launches.

We hoisted the Nazi flag under the White Ensign and sailed rather proudly down the swept channel. One destroyer signalled us to close; we stopped close by as her captain wished to question us. When he had finished I noticed that Edwards, always a humorist, had collected a crowd of sailors at the side of the destroyer much interested in him. He was demonstrating a large picture of Hitler with appropriate gestures, to the great joy of his audience.

We proceeded into harbour with something of a triumphal entry, the crews of the destroyers and trawlers as we passed waving their caps and cheering (a never to be forgotten tribute from men such as they), culminating in the entrance to the base.

The news of the capture of the E-boat had got round, the whole dockside was lined and most enthusiastic.

The gunboats had worked hard, wearily, and a long time for this; the feeling that one had done something of value at last was all the more welcome for that.

The Captain, who had so often wished us luck and seen us off, was there, seemingly as happy as we were; I believe he was.

I went ashore to make a preliminary report, leaving the booty to be sorted out in the presence of an Intelligence expert, lately arrived from town. We were told that fighters had found three E-boats limping home and had engaged them most effectively; it was possible that we had got two out of the five. At least we knew that two had been beaten up pretty badly at point-blank range, two others roughly handled.

I had to settle down to the more humdrum business of getting out a report and preparing for the next big job that night, but all the time at the back of my head there was the cheering thought, "Motor gunboats have begun to justify their existence; we have made a start, can we keep it up?"

That afternoon we were off again, but we could not expect another favour from fortune so soon; the weather broke and we had ten hours' bitter drenching plug back into the teeth of a south-westerly gale. "A bloody sight worse than fighting E-boats," as a member of my crew so rightly observed.

I WAS THE FIRST R.N.V.R. officer to be given command of a gunboat in February, 1941.

We formed up in the early months of 1941 at Fowey, where we worked up the flotilla. The Senior Officer was Lieutenant Peter Howes, R.N., a young man of forceful personality and considerable ability. The other boats to commission were commanded by Lieutenants and Sub-Lieutenants, R.N., and an extraordinarily good lot they were. Then came my boat, and a few months later the last boat joined us under Lieutenant Alan Gotelee, R.N.V.R.—commonly known as Goaters.

Howes was determined to make his flotilla into a useful fighting force. In spite of great difficulties he succeeded. The 6th Flotilla in its early days and in its later successes did much to establish the name of Motor Gunboats, and during the summer of 1941, before the other flotillas which later did such good work had formed up, almost alone kept the gunboat flag flying. This was in large part due to Howes's personality and energy. He worked hard to develop the boats technically, trying out different propellers, tuning the engines, and getting the boats re-armed in the summer of 1941. But I have an idea that one of his most useful assets to the flotilla was his great self-confidence and ability to create an atmosphere of importance and interest concerning his flotilla (what we R.N.V.Rs. rudely called "bangmearse"). It was very helpful at a time when we were not sure of our job, or that we should ever be able to do what was wanted effectively, because the limitations of the boats seemed almost insuperable.

When I commissioned my boat in February I had been away from my family for nearly a year and a half, so we were delighted

at the prospect of some weeks at Fowey where they could be with me.

Two other boats, commanded by Lieutenant P. Whitehead, R.N., and Lieutenant D. ("Arty") Shaw, R.N., were ready at the same time as mine.

The morning we were to go, the 13th of February, dawned ominously, with a red sky and a gusty south-easterly wind. It really did not look good enough, but we were determined to go. We had to arrange call signs before we left, and we discussed these on deck. Shaw's was to be "Dave," his Christian name, Whitehead's "Percy"; I couldn't think of anything suitable for myself.

"Why not 'Hitch'?" said Shaw in his slow way, and so it was. Ever after in coastal forces, whether in the North Sea or ashore, I was known as "Hitch."

We slipped and sped out to sea at cruising speed. I was third in the line since all R.N.V.R. officers were automatically junior to R.N. officers of the same rank. (This has since been altered by the introduction of the "Qualified" R.N.V.R. officer.) The wind was coming in spiteful squalls on the port bow, bearing on its back great black clouds, which foretold more wind and driving rain.

The wind was south-east, and when it is in this direction the full force of the sea is not apparent until well clear of the Needles on a course for Anvil Point. As we thrust out to sea through the narrow neck by Hurst Point, treading on the short steep waves kicked up by the ebb-tide, we could see the angry line of water several miles to the southward, sharp jagged peaks with breaking crests, and in between, a seemingly smooth stretch of water under the lee of the Needles. But this was deceptive; though the broken water of the wind-whipped Channel was still some way off, the swell driven on by the sea running off shore was sweeping in quiet but steep undulations round the southern extremity of the Needles. We were all inexperienced and the height of the sea was hard to judge. On we sped until, suddenly, we reached the top of the first big swell. It was a breath-taking sensation as we dropped off it; the boats fell so sharply that men were left two feet in the air. The sickening drop as you left your stomach

behind, the shuddering bang as the forepart of the boat hit the hollow of the wave.

We had none of us done this before. We were all pretty startled. Automatically throttles were brought down and the unit slowly pulled itself together at about 20 knots.

In one case the harm was already done. Whitehead's boat dropped further and further back, her lamp beginning to speak:

"Coxswain's back severely damaged; returning to harbour for immediate medical attention."

The poor man when coming down to earth, so to speak, had missed his footing and injured his back severely. He was in hospital for many months.

My coxswain, Curtis, had also injured his leg and had to relinquish the wheel. It had been a surprise, but a useful one. We had learnt our lesson. Whitehead receded into the distance. Shaw and I ploughed on, now right out in the full force of the sea. It was blowing hard and there was obviously worse to come, but we had it on our beam luckily, and in a short while when we rounded St. Albans Head it would be on our port quarter. Had the wind been ahead we should have had one of our worst trips.

Gaining confidence with the wind and sea well aft, we increased to 24 knots, and a wonderful sight those little boats were, close to the race off Portland Bill.

The wind had risen to almost gale force, at least 7 or 8; with the effect of the race on the sea, there were some very sharp and, for us, large waves. We jumped through them like porpoises, at one moment entirely hidden from each other by the crest of a wave or by solid sheets of spray, at another exposed to view well down to the under belly of the ship, with a third of the boat's keel forward clear of the water, like a large fish leaping from a wave.

It was an exhilarating and satisfying experience. Slowly, as we plunged and thrust across West Bay, my admiration for the sea qualities of these little boats grew and grew. We were wet, yes, soaked, but what other little ship could go through this at 24 knots and not be drowned? The stability of the boats was wonderful, the way they adapted themselves to the tumbled surface of the

sea was a joy, and there grew up in me a confidence and pleasure in my gunboat that I have never lost.

As we neared Start Point the weather thickened and visibility reduced to a few miles. Presently we just caught a glimpse of the land, then it closed down again. Being a West-countryman I knew this coast well. Shaw stopped and asked whether I had recognized the land. I told him I thought I had sighted the entrance to Salcombe, a black gash in the high cliffs, all made indistinct by the driving mist, as though a veil had been partially torn aside. He suggested I should lead. I went off confidently, shaping a course, as I thought, to clear Prawle Point, and suddenly saw towering above me the cliffs just to the southward of Dartmouth. In that glimpse I had mistaken the entrance of Dartmouth for the entrance to Salcombe.

“Hard-a-port.”

We swung round into the teeth of the wind. Two or three shattering bumps in quick succession brought our speed down to a mere crawl, 10 or 12 knots. We had indeed learnt our lesson. The sea was piling up in here, short and steep. Due to my mistake, we had four miles dead plug into it before we could square away round the Start. Where were those Skerries rocks? The rocks between the Start and Dartmouth? I slid down from the dustbin to the wheelhouse, my oilskin trousers, having no means of support visible or invisible, slipping down and binding my legs as though I were a competitor in a sack-race. I hastily consulted the chart, looked blankly at the wheelhouse windows perpetually covered in sheets of spray, and hoped that my course would clear the danger; forced my way back into the dustbin, hitching frantically at my trousers, and saw with a sigh of relief the Skerries buoy close on the starboard bow.

This was sifting the crew already. My leading stoker, Punton, a wonderful man, later to prove the tiger of the crew, was on the wheel. Momentarily I considered why he was there, then seeing the quiet satisfaction in his face as he exerted his strength and skill, I wondered no longer.

Start Point bore squat and solid on the beam.

“Starboard wheel.”

We could bear away at last and stop that maddening spray slapping, slapping into one's eyeballs.

In a very few minutes, with a west-flowing tide, we were abreast of Prawle Point, and with one of those magical changes that are not infrequent in the West country, the whole scene was abruptly changed. The driving mist was swept away for good. The wind dropped to a whisper, and, clear of the sheer black cliffs, the steep sea steadied out miraculously into a smooth undulation.

Tentatively we lifted the throttles, 18 knots, 24 knots, soon we were sweeping west at 30 knots, bouncing and swooping, cleaving the waves in unending sequence and inevitable impermanence.

Past the Eddystone Lighthouse, always to my mind like an enormous candle surrounded by a sea of its own grease, the latest droppings of which show white and foaming at the foot, until we could see the sheer black outline of the Dodman, tremendously impressive against the watery sinking sun. Where was the entrance to Fowey? As ever there seemed to be no opening in those grey Cornish cliffs. Ah, there was the Gribben day mark, like a man, a giant, silhouetted against the skyline.

The cliffs closed in on us and we slowed to a crawl to pass the boom gates, a strange reminder in these, to me, intensely familiar surroundings.

We had made our first passage. The immediate need was to release Edwards. We had been warned that our Boulton Paul turret, an electrically worked aeroplane turret housing four .303 Browning guns—our main armament—reacted extremely badly to salt water, that the base filled up and shorted all the power. So we had to insert the gunner and seal up all the openings with a special plastic compound and tape. This we had duly done, and poor Edwards had spent the six hours of the trip sitting stiffly in his cramped seat, observing with some alarm the threatening approach of the steep quartering sea, and probably muttering to himself:

"Christ, why did I ever leave a bloody battleship?"

As we steamed slowly up the Fowey River, past the huddled grey

houses rising steeply to the sky-line, we ripped off the tape and released our gunner.

Howes greeted us with surprise; we were just a little bit proud of ourselves, as another member of the flotilla, who only had to come from Dartmouth, had not been allowed to sail because of the weather.

I shall pass very quickly over our brief stay at Fowey. We thrashed about in the open waters off the Udder Rock, doing shoots and manœuvres and learning to keep station, the most necessary qualification in a gunboat officer. Looking back on it the thing that strikes me most is the fact that we had no idea of what out fighting would be like, so that our preparation was mostly wrong; we had to learn our correct tactics in the hard school of night actions at sea.

Where we should have been devising and practising the correct formations and special tactics required for our high speed close, in fighting with E-boats, we were going solemnly through the various naval fleet formations, from Order 1, line ahead, to Order 6, subdivisions in line abreast to starboard columns disposed astern. We hauled flags up and down with the boats doing 30 knots over a long Cornish swell that every now and then gave us a rude jolt, and many were the concentrated panics aboard my boat when the appropriate flag couldn't be found or worse still the leader's hoist couldn't be read or understood, while the sharp-eyed seagulls floated serenely along, keeping close station without moving their wings. So keen were we on flags that we even produced tin ones which could be held sideways to the wind, and so read at high speed!

Mercifully, in our case all this make-believe was very soon to give way to the sterner realities of war. Fowey was a brief bright interlude, chiefly memorable for the glorious story of the old man who was quietly rowing close to the Town Quay at high tide; an over-zealous young officer proceeded up the river in his gunboat, strictly against orders, at over 20 knots, and the next stroke the old man took was on dry land: he had been lifted neatly up on the wash and deposited on the quay!

Then one evening, after we had been there for ten days, there came the whispered rumour of a job:

"All available gunboats to sail the following evening on a special job."

That was the effect of it. Were we to go? The three of us that had recently arrived had done no night work as yet. Would we be allowed to take part?

Luckily there were only one or two of the operating flotilla based at Fowey able to work, so they needed us. We sailed for another port that day, received our orders and prepared for action for the first time. Little did we think what arduous work we should have to go through before we had our first real fighting.

I shall never forget our get-away that evening. We were the only boat of the three tied up to the jetty, the others having fuelled and moored to a buoy in mid-stream. We were slipping at dusk, and being T.A.C. ("Tail arse Charley" as the junior boat was called) I was to follow in behind the others as they sailed down the river. In good time I gave the order to start up. The self-starters ground. Nothing happened. This went on and on. Presently the first lieutenant and others were delivering short and concise messages to the engine room. Still nothing happened.

The others burst into throbbing life and let go. I could see them begin to slide slowly down past the town. I had no means of explaining my predicament; my feelings can be imagined. My very first operation, and unable to join because the engines wouldn't start, a thing that had never happened before. Nothing worse could occur to an untried C.O.; they might think anything of one. At the last moment by the grace of God one engine started.

"Let go!"

They would be out of sight in a minute. I had to risk manœuvring on one engine.

Turning hard-a-port with the starboard engine running we just managed to get round inside the line of ships moored the length of the harbour, the engines picked up and accelerating rapidly took up our station as though nothing had happened. It is hard to define the reason, but it remains one of the most anxious moments of my life.

Our job for the night was to act as a covering force for another operation. We achieved this without incident, but how we

managed to keep together as a unit I do not know. We had had no night experience, and it came on to blow from the south-west force 3 to 4 with driving rain. Howes had not yet learnt the tips we subsequently practised of getting a unit off in difficult conditions and of giving warning of a turn; nor did we have a shaded stern light in the rain, which later would have been installed. We did 30 knots under way the whole time. I can still remember vividly the anxiety we went through in the blinding rain near the French coast when we seemed to have lost the leader at the turn. We hung on somehow and we had our compensations in the morning. There was the impressive high land behind the Start with a bright, clear dawn and a rapidly freshening wind, very beautiful to behold; and had we not accomplished our first operation successfully? And did we not anxiously spell out a semaphore signal from the S.O., as the great hills of the river valley enclosed us once more, "Well done"? We had only achieved the least that was expected of us, but we had been inexperienced and he knew what we had been through.

The other unit had not fared so well. After stopping for a while in the low visibility caused by rain, the S.O. (S.O. of the operating flotilla) had suddenly, with the minimum of signalling and no time to be sure that all engines had started, dashed off at 30 knots. The others had shot after him, creaming up his wake with wide open throttles, hoping to see him and having only an indistinct wake to follow. The S.O., finally noticing that he had not his unit with him, stopped as quickly as he had started—the second boat coming on him suddenly swerved to starboard, slammed down throttles and stopped, the third close behind unluckily chose to swerve to starboard also on sighting the S.O., and rammed the second. She was seriously damaged, luckily above water, and had to limp home alone. This was very largely if not entirely due to lack of method in handling a unit at sea. It was an initial fault of many of our young senior officers that they would not take sufficient care and precautions to enable the following boats to be handled safely. In this case, had the S.O. given his unit plenty of time to start up and gone slowly until he had seen that they were in formation, there would have been no accident. This should

have been more especially his care since he knew that neither boat had had any night experience.

Subsequently the S.O.'s. boat developed stern gland trouble and filled her engine room with water; another boat made endless efforts to tow her which were fruitless in the increasing weather conditions. Finally a destroyer had to come out for her and tow her in, finding her only after her D.R.* position had been altered 15 miles by a sight taken by an officer acting as navigator, probably the only occasion when a sun sight has been taken and used successfully from a fast gunboat.

This, I should imagine, was a fairly good example of the type of operational result that made Senior Officers ashore dislike gunboats. Two seriously damaged, out of action for weeks, and a destroyer engaged for fifteen or twenty hours to assist, exposed the while to danger of air attack.

We were held in harbour for a week unable to rejoin the rest of the flotilla on account of strong westerly winds. While there we were entertained ashore, and in return Howes arranged to take a large party of cadets out in the boats to show them what they were like. It was a fine evening with a strong westerly wind and there was a heavy swell sweeping round the headland. We each had about twenty boys aboard and when we were well outside, to my horror, Howes led right into the sea and opened up, evidently to show the little boys what we had to take. We started leaping and banging, and taking the spray over heavily.

Many of the small boys began to turn peculiar colours, and some of them, having no room anywhere but on the open deck, were clinging on for dear life. I began to get really anxious, but was greatly heartened by the sight of C. E. C. Martin (the racing motorist, number one of a new boat which had joined us at Dartmouth), standing with his back to the gun aft with his arms outstretched "fielding" for any of the passengers who might begin to be bumped sternwards.

The next day we returned to Fowey and immediately received

* Dead Reckoning: the ship's position estimated by laying off on the chart all the courses steered and distances run since the last opportunity of fixing the position accurately.

our sailing orders. "The 6th Flotilla was to sail forthwith for the East Coast." This was exciting news indeed. Many rumours began to circulate, as always on these occasions. The East coast convoys were having a bad time; the E-boats were swarming in that area; a destroyer had been sunk and they wanted the special anti-E-boat weapon.

The day before we sailed a German aircraft, in broad daylight and with no opposition, dropped mines accurately in the narrow entrance to Fowey. Aiming at bottling up the gunboats, they had done this before with success; but early on the morning of the 6th March, 1942, in bright winter's sunlight, we slid out close to the high black eastern cliffs and headed for our operational base.

Of the journey round there is little that needs telling. Three boats of the five that sailed from Fowey arrived after several days. Two had fallen by the wayside, at Portsmouth to be precise, but the trip had shaken the crews still further into shape.

Quite incidentally also we had been under fire as a flotilla for the first time. As we were jogging past Anvil Point in flat calm sunshine all five of us in tight formation, a stick of bombs came down with a sibilant sigh, just audible above the roar of the engines, and burst in the water a hundred yards astern. None of us had seen the aircraft dip suddenly out of the clouds. I remember poking my head into the wheelhouse and asking why the W/T was oscillating so, as the bombs whistled by.

Two incidents remain in my mind: one, an air raid at Portsmouth. I was standing by my after turret to control the fire. Suddenly the turret of the boat alongside roared into life, its four Browning guns with their high muzzle velocity and bright tracer shattering the night air, and spitting a bright path of light low across the forecastle of my boat, where several of the crew were standing. They fell flat and by the grace of God no one was hurt.

I leapt across to the turret yelling at the occupant; the only result was another terrifying burst of fire on exactly the same bearing. It was time for deeds not words. The guns did not speak again. It transpired that the quaking victim was a stoker who wrongly thought he understood the turret; he thought that you

trained the guns by pressing a certain little button; actually you fired them by so doing. A sad case of misplaced zeal.

The second incident was a good deal more alarming. While in harbour we lay right inside some cats (catamarans). It is a very tricky place, as you have to execute a sharp 180° turn round the end of the cats from the inner position to attain the outer channel, with very little sea-room to do it in. It definitely means swinging your boat by going ahead and astern respectively on different engines.

All five of the sixth flotilla were packed close together in the inner berth on the morning after our arrival, and there were several M.T.Bs. moored on the outer side of the cats. We were changing plugs, and thus had only one engine we could use. Suddenly there was a cry of "Fire." One of the M.T.Bs. on the outer side of the cats had had an explosion in her engine-room and was almost immediately ablaze from stem to stern. Several of her personnel were blown clean out of her on to the cats; it was soon clear that the fire could not be controlled. It was seen at once that we should be in grave trouble if the warheads of the torpedoes or the air bottles of the tubes should explode. We all proceeded to start up and endeavour to get out of the inner basin as quickly as possible. Having only one engine available it was impossible to get my boat out, and being tied alongside another boat we arranged that she should try to swing both of us together out around the end of the cats to safety. It soon became apparent that she could not do it against the northerly wind blowing us all the time towards the mud, where we should lie helpless, no more than a hundred feet from the blazing M.T.B. Every time we began to get round, another boat manœuvring to get out gave us a nudge back in the wrong direction. Finally the other boat gave it up, let us go, and got out of it. By this time all the others had got away, and the M.T.B. was a mass of flames burning steadily to the water line, with streams of shells bursting out from her with the curious "pheet-pheet" of the unenclosed bullet ignited. The situation seemed sufficiently alarming; the heat generated round the air bottles and the war heads was terrific, the metal was glowing a dull red. We were helpless, unable to

turn with only one engine, and being blown steadily on to the mud. The only thing to do was to clear away, let go the anchor, and hope for the best. Boffin was ashore getting stores; I jumped on to the foredeck and superintended the clearing away of the anchor, casting an anxious eye from time to time at the burning hull. She was getting lower and lower, the war-heads would soon be submerged. I began to feel that all was over and we were safe. Just as we were letting go the anchor the port engine burst into life.

“Hold on. Stow that anchor.”

I nipped back to the controls and took her gently out, our propellers churning up thick patches of mud where we had been nearly aground.

Within three minutes we had berthed alongside the others; a cable from the blazing remains. As the order was given to stop engines there was a shattering explosion, and a black cloud covered the wreck. An air bottle exploded with one of the loudest bangs I have ever heard. Large bits of metal landed half a mile away, and the front of a building was blown in, killing a Wren. It was fortunate that the casualties were no worse. We were indeed lucky. Had we not got out just three minutes before the explosion we should have been in the immediate line of the blast, which was directed across the inner basin.

We arrived without further incident in a thick fog, after some extremely accurate navigation (not always to be repeated) by our temporary S.O., Dicky Richards, and some even more dashing leadership. Doing 30 knots in the approaches to harbour through fog patches in which you could not see the leading boat further than half a cable, opened my eyes to things to come, and some of the chances we were later to have to take.

We were arriving at our proper theatre of war and we were glad of it. It was to prove a long struggle; a struggle not only or even primarily with the enemy, but first to understand and conquer our temperamental craft, and then to acquire the necessary equipment and discover the essential operating tactics without which success would have been impossible.

FOR THREE OR FOUR WEEKS after we arrived at H.M.S. *Beehive* we were not used.

However, we started out for our first operation on a lovely spring evening in early April. The boats were Dicky Richards (S.O.) and Boffin and I in my boat. We were to patrol on the convoy route.

For eleven hours on end we patrolled in line ahead, until mercifully my steering jammed, and we slowed and stopped to examine the gear.

Oh, the joy of the peace and silence! We had been under way since 5 p.m. the evening before: hours of continuous nerve-racking tension and noise. This is nothing exceptional for an M.T.B. or M.G.B. officer. I have often since done as much as sixteen or nineteen hours on end under way in our little cramped dustbin, two feet six inches by five feet, subjected to the tension of station-keeping at 30 knots, much of the time in the dark where, an instant's inattention or lapse of judgment might mean disaster sudden and devastating. I am inclined to think that this is the greatest physical and mental strain to which a serving officer is subjected as a matter of normal routine. I have not flown on long bombing flights. Doubtless these can be very exhausting, but they are rarely so long, the pilot is sitting in comparative comfort; he is not subjected to the intense noise and rush of cold air and often continuous spray, and above all he is not undergoing the strain of close station-keeping. The noise, vibration and flow of air remind one of an open racing car. I have raced repeatedly in the 24-hour race at Le Mans in a small open British car and not found it so exhausting as a bad night in a gunboat.

This feeling of utter physical and mental exhaustion has to be felt to be understood. I do not believe that the majority of people have ever experienced it. I certainly had not until I operated gunboats. The last few hours as the light makes, the tension of night station keeping relaxed, searching the horizon for a landfall (on the East coast always a buoy), are almost the worst of all. Though it is easier, this very fact makes it more difficult to fight off the clutching hands of sleep and, curiously, the younger men invariably nod off. Shapes appear wherever you look on the horizon, you have to tell yourself all the time: "I'm only seeing that," because after you have experienced the reality you know that it is different from the images. When you are ashore and it is all over, the relaxation is complete and overwhelming. You feel quite a different person, either stupidly happy over a drink or irritable and depressed, small difficulties seeming desperate and insurmountable. One's natural stability is largely gone. Finally you get to bed and understand for the first time that sleep really is a vital chemical process. It literally does renew you; after ten hours you come back, a normal man again. And one other thing you have learnt, that you have been fussing unnecessarily because you have lain abed often before with sleep evading you. If you are sufficiently exhausted sleep will come, willy nilly—"The sleep that knitteth up the ravelled sleeve of care."

After this we started a grind of patrols.

Most of these were not memorable, but I recollect clearly one of the last of them because it was such an uncomfortably rough night. We were patrolling up and down to seaward of some M.L.s., who had a number of decidedly senior officers on board, 4-ring captains* and such like. It blew up to a force 4 to 5 nor-westerly wind and on one leg of the patrol we were bumping straight into it. I remember saying some pretty succinct things to Boffin about senior officers and gunboats generally by the time we had done our eighth flog back into it, covered in spray, with the frequent, drastic jarring and banging. It was made particu-

* A term used to differentiate between an officer of the rank of captain (wearing four stripes on his sleeve) and an officer of more junior rank who is the captain of a ship.

larly trying upon this occasion because the W/T aerial fell down with the bumping, and the leads to the compass light shorted, with the result that wherever I put my hands I got a shock. I am particularly sensitive to electrical shocks; I am far removed from the man I have seen who can stop a lorry engine by putting his hands across all four plug terminals; the result was an agonizing night, getting minor shocks wherever I felt for support.

In that wanton manner in which other people's misfortunes are a solace to one's own, we had our consolation in the morning. The C.O. of the boat following had knocked out one of his front teeth, and the senior officers in the M.Ls. had been woefully seasick.

One of our early patrols indirectly resulted in our first brush with the enemy. It happened this way.

We were running up the East Coast when reports began to come through of E-boats on the convoy route. This went on so continuously and enticingly that Howes finally decided to move up towards the area of strife. The three of us sped away northward at full speed.

Presently the escorts began to put up starshell to seaward of the convoy. We swept in a great semi-circle round the perimeter of the area lit by starshell. I shall not easily forget that run. The sea quiet, the port side of the hulls lit up by the greeny white glare of the starshells, the wake creaming aft under the high pulsing beat of the engines opened up to their maximum continuous effort; men were on tip-toe, it seemed that the enemy must be near, and the steady fierce rush of the wind in the face kept them alert and expectant. Abruptly and yet almost unperceived the thing we were expecting was upon us; I saw a swirl of wash to port and noticed the leader going hard a-port. I looked back and there it was, unforgettable and vivid in my mind now, my first sight of the enemy at sea. The moon was to the southward, astern; silhouetted in the moon's path, about a cable astern, was the black malevolent shape of an E-boat's bows, crossing at right angles to our line of advance, heading for the convoy.

"Hard-a-port." The order shouted into the voicepipe was drowned by the high-pitched deafening crackle of the four Brownings aft. Edwards had got his teeth into them without

hesitation. We swung round close alongside, Howes opening up as we did so and gaining on him. The E-boats, there were at least three of them, were turning away, accelerating; the next moment our whole world was blotted out. We were in dense smoke at full speed and close alongside another boat. There was nothing to be done about it, except carry on, hope for the best, and aim to come out up moon of the smoke screen. Tearing through this dense smoke cloud, unable to see even the bow of your own boat, was a harrowing experience. Luckily I remembered to give the coxswain a course at once. After what seemed like an age, actually I suppose about three minutes, the smoke began to thin, and suddenly, like a transformation scene in a pantomime, we were out in the clear moonlight again. There was a thick line of smoke billowing away to port, looking like an ever elongating and enlarging caterpillar.

Turning quickly round, I could see a black hull tearing along three hundred yards on our starboard quarter. The opportunity I had dreamed of, to have obtained adequate bearing on an E-boat for a close in depth charge attack, seemed within my grasp.

"Stand by to let go starboard depth charge."

Boffin scrambled over the whaleback and dropped down close to the large drumlike weapon. His head re-appeared close to mine and in a horrified shout he informed me that he did not know how to set the depth charge to fire. An entirely unmoved voice replied from the wheelhouse in measured tones:

"Press the key in and turn to the right, sir."

The coxswain was always at his best in these moments of crisis. Boffin never again forgot how to set a depth charge!

There flashed across my mind a doubt. Was it one of our own boats? I had gone into the smoke still a little astern of Howes; the third boat was well back. I didn't think it likely that I had got ahead of Howes, and I doubted if the other boat could be up so close. Still better make sure. I flashed him; back came the answering flash at once. It was Howes after all. We had led out of the smoke. I had nearly depth-charged my Senior Officer.

Immediately we were again enveloped in thick smoke; go where we would we were plunged in dense patches of the wretched

stuff, thrashing our way eastward in pursuit of the fleeing E-boats. We none of us saw them again, though we nearly rammed and engaged one of our own boats, saved once more by the rapid use of the challenge.

We had all engaged them for a brief minute or two before they made smoke; they had replied, but very half-heartedly. At that close range we must have hit them to some extent, and when starting for home we had observed a large orange flash some miles to the eastward. Thinking it might be Howes, who had not joined up, we turned and went back eight miles in the direction of the explosion, but could see nothing. It was not Howes and we do not know to this day whether it was an E-boat blowing up, or what it was.

Of this period, the period up to the time that my boat went away to be re-armed, and I came back to take over the flotilla, I have little more to say. But there were a few patrols that deserve comment. The first was an air-sea rescue trip.

There had been a fairly strong northerly wind which had died away, leaving a long bumpy swell. We were all busy at ten o'clock in the morning, cleaning guns, checking W/T, testing steering and compass lights, all the usual preparations in anticipation of a job that night. Suddenly a shout along the dockside.

“All gunboats prepare for sea forthwith.”

A quick look round, a word with the coxswain and motor mechanic, and I knew that we were ready. Howes was coming along the dockside. I reported all ready to him. He said:

“Right. You take three boats with you. Slip as quickly as you can. Get your clothes and come to S.O.O's. office for orders.”

I gave a few brief orders to Boffin and the coxswain, and ran up for my seagoing gear, which included my old guernsey. I had had that old blue jersey since I was a boy. It had been with me on all my more adventurous sailing trips. I had worn it always at sea throughout the first year of the war in a minesweeper and at Dunkirk, and I had begun to look on it as my lucky mascot. Sailors are notoriously superstitious, there is something about the risks at sea and the fact that luck plays so large a part in the success or failure of any seaman's activities, that lends itself to

the development of this way of thinking. Be that as it may, by this time I was firmly convinced of the importance to me of this old jersey, and I would not have gone to sea without it unless utterly impossible to do otherwise.

I remember rushing down, donning my garments, and speculating as to the cause of this unexpected and urgent call, S.O.O. had our orders ready. We were to search for five airmen, the crew of a large bomber, who had been in the sea now for three days and nights. The H.S.Ls.,* the R.A.F. air-sea rescue launches, had been out after them all this time, but had had no joy so far, in spite of aircraft reports of the men's position. So the gunboats had been called in. It was a challenge to take up.

The engines were running, splitting the silence in the confined space of the dock. We jumped aboard,

"Good luck," from Howes.

"Let go."

"Ahead port."

The boats were gliding to sea, accelerating, the engines throbbing louder and louder, until they attained a steady roar as we settled down to fast cruising speed in open water. This was my first chance to study the chart and consider the position given to us.

"What a hell of a long way," was my first comment.

The little cross I had marked on the chart was to the north-east of Cromer, right out in the North Sea, one hundred and fifty miles away.

We were out on the convoy route, and were bumping quite considerably in the northerly swell. We had a long run up the coast before we left the convoy route; this would give us a good opportunity of checking the accuracy of courses by the buoys. The effect of bumping on the compass can throw the course out by many degrees. It was a matter of care and judgment to ascertain the exact compass course to steer in bumpy conditions in order to make good any required course. I remember swearing to myself, as I studied the tidal streams in relation to the direction of the wind and swell, that I would put everything I had got into the navigation. Did not five men's lives depend upon the finding

* High-speed launch.

of that little cross, or such other little cross as we might be given to reach?

On we roared. We left the convoy route and our last navigational aids. We ate our sandwiches. I told the coxswain that everything depended upon the accuracy of his steering. He stuck to the wheel all through that day. He was a magnificent helmsman. At 1300 we received a signal ordering us to sweep a line from a little ahead of where we then were, to a position fifteen miles away from our original goal. They were evidently getting aircraft plots of the men. We were told there were reports of two rubber dinghies. The buzz spread from the W/T cabin and interest quickened. We altered course slightly and spread to visibility distance, thus covering a searching lane of at least fifteen miles.

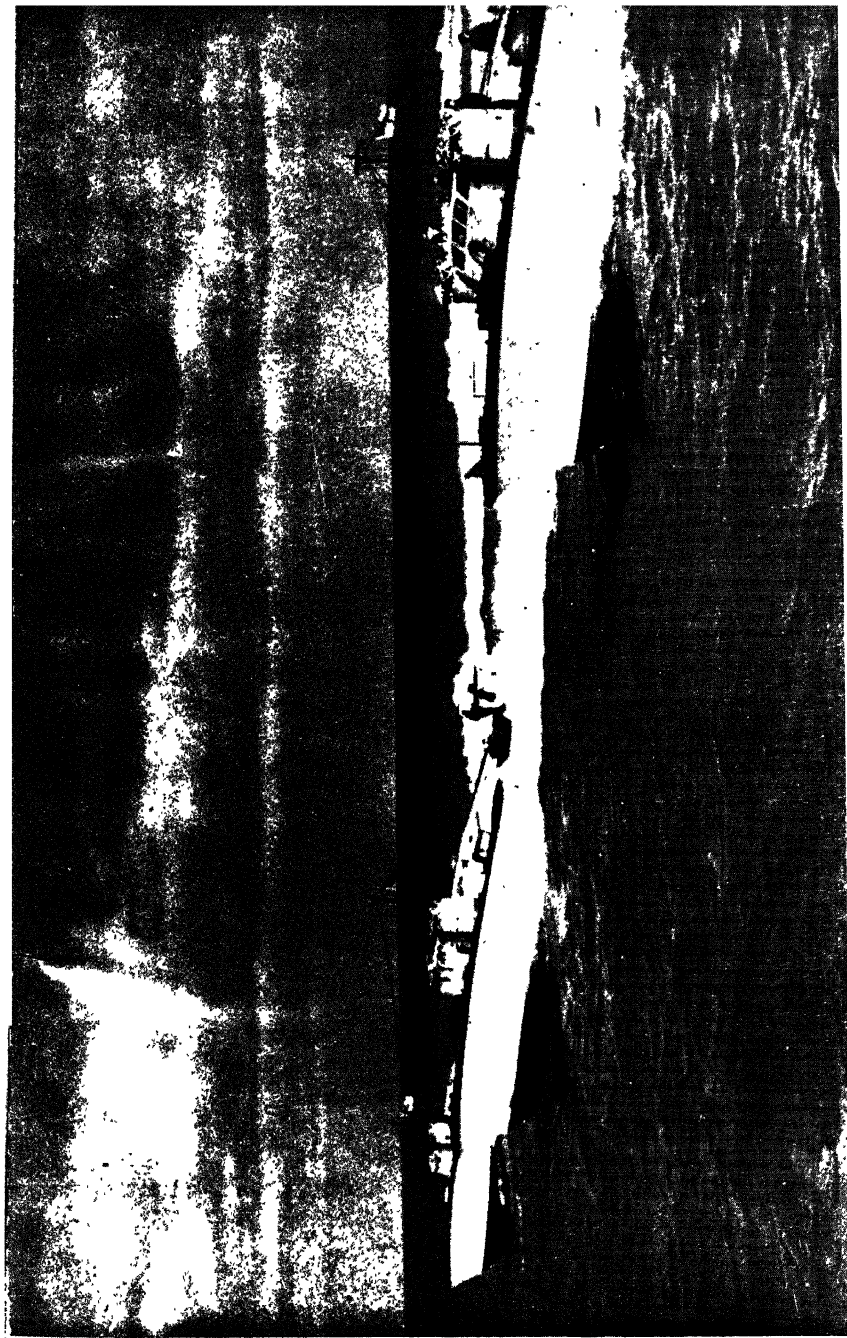
Presently one boat flashed Harry, meaning a breakdown. We had a long way to go yet and probably many hours of searching before us, we had to retain our speed and could not afford to keep a boat with one engine out and a speed of 18 knots. I ordered her to return independently.

On we went at our original speed, our search was reduced to a ten mile trip.

At 1500 we reached the second position ordered and stopped. I considered what to do next. The obvious thing seemed to be to proceed to the position originally ordered, which was fifteen miles away, in case it had been the right one. Suddenly there was a shout from Punton, the leading stoker, aft.

"Making water fast, sir."

This was unpleasant news. We were a long way from home. I went to inspect. There was no doubt about it. The starboard propeller bracket had broken its retaining bolts; the propeller, on the unsupported shaft, was being allowed to swing up against the boat, and had cut a hole the size of a dinner plate in the bottom. The after compartment was flooding rapidly. If the bulkhead to the engine-room failed, nothing could save the boat. The only hope was to keep her going fast, so that the self-bailers acting by the suction of the boat's speed through the water, and helped by the lift of the hull when planing, could keep the water level down.



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THREE MOTOR GUNBOATS IN LINE ABREAST



LIEUT.-COMMANDER HICHENS AND HIS GUNBOAT'S CREW

"Start up."

I explained the situation to Richards in the other boat by semaphore and moved off, accelerating to 30 knots, shaping a course for the original position. We couldn't give up the search at this stage with five men, maybe quite close, in the drink. We kept an anxious eye on the after compartment. It kept a steady level of water, about eighteen inches deep, as long as we retained our speed.

We spread again and continued our search. Three aircraft came over, took a look at us and passed ahead in the direction in which we were going. They did not seem to know where to go either, and gave us no lead, such as we had hoped for.

We were within a mile or two of my first little cross, or so I reckoned. I was wondering what to do next, as we could not stop, when the problem was solved for me by a further signal from the Nore.

"Proceed to position. . . ."

Eagerly I plotted my third little cross. It was thirty-five miles away in exactly the reverse direction to that in which we were proceeding.

Round we wheeled. Anxiously I checked the tide. We had been under way now for six hours and had covered some one hundred and eighty miles. Could we keep our D.R. accurate?

"What are you steering, coxswain?"

"South 74 east, sir."

"Make it 76."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Well, I couldn't do more than check the figures and sea conditions as carefully as possible.

We were joined by an H.S.L., which hove over the horizon coming on opposite courses. She asked permission to join up with us, as she had lost herself. I agreed, spread her on my port side, the other M.G.B. being stationed to starboard, and gave her my estimated position.

On we went, the men were silent now. They had had a tiring time already, keeping their eyes skinned, the first excitement and enthusiasm were wearing off. Mercifully our starboard prop kept

going and the water held its level, though I was expecting to have trouble with the shaft at any moment.

We received another signal.

Another sweep for fifty miles to the west, and then one hundred and eighty miles home. Would the boat stand it? That meant another seven or eight hours running at 30 knots. We should have to go into Lowestoft. Lucky we started with a high fuel load. We were getting near to the end of the run down to the third little cross. A mile and a half to go.

"Object in the water fine on the port bow, sir."

It was the port Lewis gunner who saw it first. Eagerly we scanned the sea. Yes! There it was, and it was a rubber dinghy too. We rushed towards it, slowing as we neared. There were no signs of airmen though. As we slid alongside we saw the tragedy at a glance.

There was one man in the dinghy. He had evidently fainted from wounds and exhaustion, and had slid down into the base of the dinghy, which had a foot of water in it. His head had fallen back and was under water. He was dead. The excitement was gone. Sailors are quickly moved from cheerful anticipation to depression. Everyone was silent.

"Signal the H.S.L. to pick up this dinghy. We will continue the search."

The tel. passed the signal. The H.S.L. had special gear for picking-up purposes and anyway we could not stop, as already our after compartment was filling dangerously.

We moved on. I looked round for the other M.G.B. I had stationed her three miles on my starboard beam. She was slowing up. Yes, definitely, and beginning to flash.

"Am closing dinghy with four airmen in."

A cheer went up when this was announced.

"Are the airmen alive?" I signalled.

"Yes, why?" came back the surprised reply.

I realized then what a silly question it was; but our recent disappointment had made me cautious.

"Have you seen another dinghy?" came from Richards. "Airmen inform us that their captain was wounded and put in one

dinghy by himself for comfort. Dinghy broke away last night and was seen drifting to the northward."

I told him of our discovery. A pause.

"Did you say he was dead?" from Richards.

One could imagine the survivors' anxious query.

"Yes."

I closed and circled Richards while he was getting the men aboard. There was nothing more to wait for. We set course for home, sent a signal informing the Nore of our success. I congratulated Curtis on his steering, and felt rewarded for my special care over the navigation, or was it luck? Mostly luck, in matters of this sort, and we had indeed been lucky. Each boat had brought up one dinghy right ahead.

We had an uneventful run back in a beautiful flat calm summer's evening. As we passed over the banks the glossy surface of the water was broken by numerous bits of floating wreckage, black and ominous against the golden sheen of the sea gilded by the setting sun.

Richards sent a signal.

"Am running out of oil, have you any to spare?"

The motor mechanic was consulted, and said that he could let them have five gallons.

"Can let you have five gallons, will this do?" was flashed back.

"Yes, just," came the reply.

But we could not stop. How to transfer the oil at 30 knots? The motor mechanic hit on a bright idea. He put it in an old ten-gallon drum and sealed the top. Over it went, and Richards stopped and picked it up, while we circled. The only other distinct memory I have of the return journey is of Boffin and I sipping sherry with extreme enjoyment as we neared harbour. We had had nothing to eat or drink since our sandwiches at noon. It was then nine in the evening; that sherry tasted very good. The first time we had had a drink on our bridge.

We had sent a signal requesting to be slipped* immediately on arrival. We roared up to the examination vessel, who made his usual signal "Stop." He must have been somewhat astonished to

* Requesting to be hauled up on to the slipway.

receive our reply, as we swept round him in a large circle at 30 knots.

"If I stop I sink, request permission to enter."

The assent came at once; in a few minutes we were in and over the slipping cradle. We had done twelve hours under way at 30 knots and over, seven and a half of them with a large hole in our bottom, and the starboard prop shaft, unsupported, describing weird and wonderful arcs beneath. Even if we did have breakdowns in our highly-strung little boats, is it to be wondered at that we grew to be very fond of them?

We had been very lucky. Lucky to find the men at once, and lucky to get back all that way with the boat in this condition. That good fortune, the secret of which I hoped lay in my old jersey, had not failed me this time.

On another occasion near the Dutch coast heavy British bombing raids were taking place. We were patrolling slowly on a flat calm sea; the night dark and moonless. Every now and then there would be bright orange flashes to starboard followed by tremendous thuds as heavy bombs landed in Holland. Suddenly a large plane, travelling from east to west, flew low over us with flames coming out of her exhausts, an intermittent popping and banging audible above the drone of our engines. There was a poignant pause. We all realized something was very wrong with her. Forty seconds later there was a crash a mile or so to port, followed instantaneously by a bright flash of flame and a horrible report.

There was no need for comment; we turned to port and opened up. Within three minutes we were on the spot. Large bits of floating wreckage surrounded us. Tanks, bits of fuselage, clothing, pieces of wing, and a half-blown up rubber dinghy. This latter we investigated at once and hauled aboard with some difficulty, all lending a hand. Of the crew of that plane we found no trace, or rather, alas, only one trace. The dinghy was covered in entrails, and the smell, a deathly smell, clung to our hands in an uncanny manner. I remember washing and scrubbing for days afterwards before I could get rid of all traces.

At the time we were much distressed. The plane was clearly

British. In a matter of seconds five brave men, living, warm and happy like ourselves, had been dashed to destruction, almost within our reach; now there was nothing left, nothing but a contaminating smell. Such experiences happen all too often in war to many; it was not my first; nevertheless they cannot but have a sobering effect. We went sadly home with our pathetic remnants, honouring afresh the men who nightly risked such a fate.

Soon after this there was a third scrap. Richards and I were very unlucky to miss all but the first little brush, since we did far more operating than the other boats. One boat was outstandingly lucky. In spite of the fact that she did comparatively few operations, she was present on all three occasions; though in the last two she had engine trouble and so took very little part. Again it was a case of intercepting in the early light. Howes was S.O. He had two boats with him. They were ordered to proceed at high speed on a northerly course to intercept E-boats. Howes early on was slowed down by overheating. The other two went ahead and made contact with three E-boats proceeding east at high speed. The enemy were silhouetted against the growing light, and Johnson, in command of the unit in Howes's absence, thinks that he could have got in quite close to them and ahead without being observed, had he held his fire. But it was his first action and he not unnaturally made this mistake of engaging the enemy too early. The result was that they altered away, and having almost as much speed as our boats, it was impossible to get in to decisive range with the enemy going flat out and altering course, escaping in the general direction of their home ports. A long range and therefore indecisive action resulted. It gave our crews experience, frightened the Germans, and resulted in their being driven ignominiously to within visibility distance of their harbour.

The last incident at sea, before our re-arming, was Dicky Richards's farewell operation. He and I had worked a lot together and had formed the opinion that, as we were out to catch E-boats, we ought to try and attract them to us. We reasoned, therefore, that far from taking the utmost precautions to black-out our boats, and show no lights or flashes whatsoever—the generally

accepted practice—we ought to put up enticing flares and show intriguing lights, in the hope that E-boats would decide to investigate and so be drawn into our net.

In late June Richards got an appointment to command another M.G.B. flotilla, which was to work in the Channel. He was to leave very shortly. The day of our last operation together, June 21st, came round. Having received no support for our flare throwing idea, we decided to try out our theories. We were on a normal patrol. The weather was perfect; such a night as makes motor gunboating a real pleasure. The sea was a glossy calm, the sky clear and full of stars, the visibility good. We waited through the few hours of darkness. As dawn began to make in the east, the time when E-boats might be setting course for home, we moved off on patrol at 30 knots, confident of considerable visibility as the light increased. Then the fun began as we set out to attract interested E-boats. Richards put up a Verey light; we countered with another, followed by a third. Dicky Richards hoisted a broom to his masthead, which we illuminated brilliantly with our searchlight. We countered by hoisting a pair of trousers and an empty rum jar, and he returned the compliment by illuminating us. The Brock's Benefit ended in an orgy of Verey lights at which we fired bursts of brilliant tracer. Altogether an attractive and satisfying display, although entirely off the record. Alas, no E-boats came. We were left alone in our self-made illumination. It will not be easy to forget that dawn. The boats seeming to skim and barely touch the smooth still water, the cool rush of air filling the lungs with oxygen, the exhilarating throb and power of the engines, the slowly changing shades of light, as yet dim, in the eastern sky, the bright flashes of rockets and tracer, the dazzling white-blue pencil of light picking out the broom at the masthead. Foolish no doubt to feel excited, and our challenge was tinged with bravado, but one could not help feeling proud of one's boat and one's officers and men; were we not following in the footsteps of our ancestors, who had fought and beaten the Dutch threat to sweep us from the seas? In our own little sphere we were challenging the Nazis to come and do their worst.

Slowly the light brightened, the excitement died, the enemy were not coming; we turned our bows for home.

I mention this little incident, foolish though it may be, because I think it illustrated the daring and offensive spirit which permeated the gunboat crews, a spirit which they retained through difficult times, until greater knowledge and improved material made it possible for them to reap its reward.

We entered harbour and tied up alongside the fuelling jetty. It was eight o'clock on the morning of June 22nd; someone switched on the radio. A head popped out of a hatch:

"Germany has attacked Russia; the balloon has gone to an unprecedented altitude."

There was a general cheer and run of excited conversation.

"That ought to be the beginning of the end, sir," said my coxswain.

History will probably confirm that he was right. However that may be, it was the end of a period in our story. Richards went to the South Coast; we went away to be re-armed. Many things were to change before we headed for patrol again.

C H A P T E R

4

CHANGE OF COMMAND

TOWARDS THE END of my time re-arming Howes rang up. His voice came sharp and incisive over the line.

"Hullo, Hitch. I'm going on a long signals course, starting at the beginning of September. I think you're the right man to take over the flotilla; will you?"

"Can't you get out of it?" I temporized.

The idea of losing Howes, with his strong personality and power of leadership, seemed devastating. I was happy enough commanding a unit at sea, but the idea of taking on all the strife ashore was an altogether different matter. In a flash I remembered how often I had been sheltered in matters large and small behind the secure barrier of his responsibility as S.O.

"No. Not a hope. I've tried everything. It's bloody." The staccato sentences drove home the full realization like hammer blows.

I said nothing. All the difficulties, the responsibilities, my own lack of knowledge and incompetence in many matters of naval routine, the mere fact of having to follow in the footsteps of such a fire-brand as Howes, these things revolved desperately before my mind like a kaleidoscope of bad dreams.

"Well, will you take it on?" The voice was insistent. I must make an instantaneous decision, a decision that would vitally affect the rest of my naval career.

Could I cope with it? I did not know the answer, but I knew deep down that it was cowardice and therefore a fatal mistake to

refuse additional responsibility and work, provided I thought I understood my job in its essentials.

"All right, I will," I said.

"Good. See you in a few days."

There was a faint click as he replaced the receiver. I was committed.

I knew that I could do the job at sea at least as well as the others, but I was not at all sure about the work ashore.

We were towed round to our base a fortnight later, by a trawler at six knots against the tide, taking no less than seven hours. I have rarely been so bored.

All too quickly Howes's last ten days passed. The weather was rough and we were being re-engined in the hangar. There was only one trip and that was disastrous. There had been a big bombing raid and several returning planes had crashed in the North Sea. Though it was blowing hard from the south-west the gunboats were ordered out to search early one morning. Howes took four boats and, as he was going down wind on the way out, he went further than he had realized and when he turned back into it, he had a hell of a passage home. They came in at mid-day soaked to the skin; three out of the four boats were gash; it was many weeks before they were running again.

Howes left at the end of August, departing in a blaze of glory and his large blue Bentley stuffed to the hatches with luggage. Just before he left he was awarded a D.S.C., fully merited. His attitude towards this was accurately summed up in his remark to me when I first saw him wearing the ribbon, and went up to congratulate him:

"Well, someone's got to hoist it for the flotilla."

He had worked hard, fought three engagements with inadequate weapons, and given gunboats their only sound start.

We gave him a good-bye party at which he made a memorable speech exhorting us to keep up the good work; we gave him a silver hip-flask with "Peter from Tigers" engraved on it in typical signalman's handwriting. "Peter" was his call sign, "Tigers" was the collective call sign of the flotilla.

At the party my younger son, Antony, then aged four, made

his initial notable remark. He had fizzy lemonade at the party for the first time and when he had finished he asked for more, saying by way of encouragement that "he liked it very much, it made him feel so fizzy and bold." Thereafter in our household aerated lemonade was known as "Fizzy Bold." Antony was rather given to apt phrases; soon after this he was being sent to his kindergarten on a Saturday morning; he was grumbling about this and saying that school was a bad place on Saturday mornings:

"It's all pushabout and humbug," he said.

I was irresistibly reminded of certain Government departments.

Howes had a very definite achievement to his credit. He had worked up and developed the first gunboat flotilla to achieve results. He had never failed to produce a unit when required; in spite of lack of knowledge of correct tactics and the extreme difficulty of finding the enemy he had engaged E-boats three times; he had made them aware of our existence. Without proper guns it was impossible for him to do more. He had founded a fine flotilla organization, introduced a regular weekly training programme which included a most valuable item in the shape of a "plotting exercise," two innovations that eventually spread from the 6th flotilla throughout coastal forces. He had developed the boats technically, re-arming them and trying new propellers and new tuning for the engines in an endeavour to obtain more speed. Most important of all, he had held the flotilla together, given it pride in itself, and instilled the right fighting attitude through his own confident and cheerful spirit.

I remember a remark that Howes made to me when we first heard we were going to H.M.S. *Beehive*. It is typical of his forceful and fighting nature. He said:

"*Beehive*: The M.T.Bs. have been installed there for years and they'll look down on us and try to push us around; we'll have to work like hell till we've altered all that and the M.G.Bs. are right on top, and what they say goes."

It was not only a typical remark, it was very prophetic. We did indeed find ourselves pushed around at first, and in the end through their energy and initiative the gunboats established a considerable ascendancy at *Beehive*; after which, being quits in

this friendly rivalry, a satisfactory working compromise was arrived at.

We were all sorry to see Howes go, I most of all. I had a natural shrinking feeling at the thought of stepping into his shoes. He had held the centre of the stage so completely and so fittingly, he was so much liked and respected by the sailors as well as the officers, that I realized it would be difficult to follow on, particularly as I had not that "*je ne sais quoi*," that inexpressible something that goes, or is supposed to go, with the straight stripes.

Though we did not know it, the wavy stripes were at the dawn of their day. Howes had handed over to an R.N.V.R., showing that he at least had an open mind. Our new Captain, Commander Kerr, had a still more open one. We had got on well with most of our R.N. officers, but many of them were leaving now. Whitehead and Dixon went, and very soon Johnson to command another flotilla. They were replaced by R.N.V.R.s., mostly our early first lieutenants. That left only Griffiths, our last "state educated" type, and he soon followed the others joyfully to take over a new boat.

We had discovered the term "state educated" to our great delight and used it invariably when referring to our straight-striped brethren; a friendly dig at our friends, with more than a touch of bitterness on occasion when it referred to our enemies.

Our main stand-by was Chief E.R.A. Pavey, the 6th Flotilla's E.R.A.; a wiry, humorous-faced little man with twinkling eyes. How that man worked! He never relaxed. No make and mend, no week-end leave, no pipe-down at 1600 for him. No nonsense about his work; no sticking to the letter of the law and so holding a boat back from sea. The boats were wanted. They kept on coming in with troubles. They must be repaired somehow and got to sea again. Hours of labour in hot engine rooms, upside down with his head in the bilges, sweat pouring down his face, his bottom as like as not against a hot manifold. Pavey was no chicken. He stuck to it and he made those boats work. There were others, of course, both base staff and seagoing personnel who were equally devoted, I shall have more to say of them later; but Pavey was the head man. He never let us down.

It is my opinion that the 6th Flotilla's performance, especially in the early days, largely saved small fast motor gunboats from an early and unlamented demise. It is my opinion also that the 6th could not have put up this performance without Pavey's unremitting care and self-sacrificing labour. Our pleasure can therefore be understood, when, in the New Year's Honours List for 1942-3, Pavey was awarded the British Empire Medal. No one deserved recognition more, and as the Captain said: "As representative of a very hard working base staff, we were proud of him."

Though Howes undoubtedly left me a fine legacy in the 6th Flotilla he also left a train of difficulties. Most of the C.Os. went with him. This left me with a set of new officers, admittedly officers I knew, since they were our original first lieutenants, but untried in command of boats. Then the boats themselves were in the most unfortunate condition. One was away re-arming, another was undergoing lengthy repairs to her bow as a result of collision, three more were all out of action for some time as a result of damage received in the recent rough trip looking for airmen. This left me with three boats only, one of which was always sure to be out with minor defects. The flotilla had never failed to produce a unit when required; I particularly did not want it to fail immediately after I had taken over.

More important than this there was a *malaise* spreading through the flotilla. Most of the more go ahead and keen officers were getting unsettled and were on the verge of applying for a transfer to destroyers or some other branch of the navy, where they considered that they were more likely to see action. This was due to several causes. The breaking down of the boats, the long spell (over two months) without any contact with the enemy or seemingly any likelihood of it, chiefly due to the fact that the E-boats were not operating in the North Sea at that time of year, a growing doubt as to whether the boats ever would be efficient enough tactically and materially to do their job. The immense difficulty in catching the E-boats coupled with the unreliability of our boats was becoming apparent and disaffecting many even enthuasistic spirits.

Soon after I took over we had a long spell of rough weather. I think we were only able to go out three times in six weeks, each time it was dishearteningly rough. I remember going in to see our then S.O.O. (an elderly ex-barrister, who knew more about the movements of shipping on the convoy route and probable future movements than anyone I knew), day after day asking for a job, until he almost got ashamed to send me away empty-handed, though it was no fault of his.

I had to do something to stem the tide that had turned against gunboats. We thought up two schemes that aroused interest and held the flotilla together until our first real success in November.

Slowly, after the disturbance caused by Howes' departure, followed soon after by the rest of the R.N. officers, we formed together again into a close-knit, keen group of officers. I can remember so well our evening discussions in the tiny wardroom of one of our boats, working out, over a bottle of port (it was available then) the details of an operation or dwelling somewhat optimistically no doubt upon certain great possibilities opened up by ideas which we were urging the Admiralty to let us try out.

The officers of the flotilla were to be all R.N.V.R. from this time on; the boats were manned as follows: Boffin Campbell took command of a boat and Head, originally intended for M.T.Bs., became my first lieutenant. Other C.Os. were Sub-Lieutenants Ronald Carr, Cowley, a Manxman, and David James, and George Duncan, a Canadian, took over from Gotelee, who wanted a larger boat and got one. Gotelee, who was a great man for the *most juste*, had nicknamed George Duncan "fearless and resolute George." Little did he realize how true his words were to be proved. You will hear of the doings of these and others and you shall judge for yourselves without comment from me.

I have said little of the crews as yet. Individuals have been mentioned, but no generalizations. Our gunboat crews fall into two periods and categories. The early period when we had a majority or at least a healthy sprinkling of active service hands, and the later days, starting from the time I took over the flotilla, when any new crews arriving were entirely "Hostilities Only" personnel, in many cases men who had never been on the sea.

The active service ratings were, many of them, magnificent hands, but some were matelots who thought they would get a slack and easy existence in small boats, far removed from the harsh words and deeds of the petty officer in a battleship. These men needed driving.

The "Hostilities Only" crews were truly amazing. They were so keen to do their share in downing the Nazis, that they could be knocked into good crews in a matter of weeks. Raw boys, from the machine shops, the lathes, the potteries, the railways, the farms, they put up with that most dreadful of scourges, seasickness in smelly engine rooms and stuffy W/T cabins, and they acquitted themselves like seasoned men in face of the enemy. I shall have much more to say of them later and nothing but praise.

But in the early days we had mostly active service men. I had some particularly good ones in my boat. I have mentioned Punton before, my leading stoker. He was a tiger. He had been in M.T.Bs. in China before the war. His one idea was to get to sea and at the enemy if possible. I wish he could have been with us later, when his wish would have been fulfilled. The way that man sweated in an engineroom, with a temperature of 110°, undergoing muscle-aching contortions, changing a set of plugs in order to keep the boat available, was a sight to inspire a cynic. Being active service stokers many of them knew about steam, but alas, little of internal-combustion engines.

The active service rating has one attribute; found nowhere else in such a high degree of development, which pleased us civilians immensely; the gentle art of tooth-sucking. If a sailor wishes to display disapproval, not being allowed to do so openly, he delivers himself of a "tooth-suck." This may be anything from the softest sibilant hiss to a loud smacking sound; an expert can register almost any degree of discontent by intermediate variations. Edwards, my after-gunner, one of the best hands afloat, a great character, was such an expert, and many have been the occasions when Boffin and I could barely conceal our amusement and indeed admiration at his artistry. I think perhaps his best effort was upon one occasion at Sunday divisions. The boats'

crews were drawn up by flotillas prepared for inspection. They had been surveyed by their officers, reported and stood at ease; we were all awaiting the arrival of the Captain.

He was late in coming and there had been a considerable pause, too great a strain upon the high spirits of some of my crew. They had shifted their feet a little and muttered a few words. I had turned round and told them to keep quiet. In the stillness intensified by the presence of several hundred motionless men, there stole out from behind my back, the very faintest whispering sound, barely audible, yet unmistakably charged with its humorous, impudent message. It was the consummation of practised skill and natural ability. There was nothing to do but pretend one had not heard and hope that the barely perceptible shaking of my shoulders would not give away to Edwards the fact that his shaft had gone home.

As the re-constituted flotilla settled down, I introduced one other element in our communal life, which was to be a success and prove of value to us. It was known as "the tactical talk."

I was determined to formulate some clearly defined plans of attack and tactical dispositions. With this in view I decided to have a weekly meeting of all the officers in my flotilla, to discuss these matters and work out our schemes; and because originally our idea was to get at the correct form of tactics for our warfare, we called it the "tactical talk."

I think it was one of the most useful training developments we had. In the early talks we got our first clearly defined forms of attacks to meet all the situations we could visualize. In some instances our original ideas proved to be wrong; but we had made a start, as we fought and gained experience, talked with others who had done likewise both in this war and the previous one, we amended and altered tactics until we arrived at a really sound fighting technique. I can affirm unhesitatingly that the tactical talk helped very considerably towards this end. It not only got us together and allowed of everyone's ideas being put forward and considered, it enabled any officer, however junior, to air his grievances or put forward his query in open counsel. It is said that Nelson's captains were a "band of brothers"; though on

a humble and undistinguished scale, we were also such a band, and without doubt it contributed much to our success.

Though we slowly pulled ourselves together mentally as a flotilla again, we had no luck with the material and physical side of operating until November. The two or three boats that we could muster were always on the edge of breakdowns because they could not be spared for maintenance.

The worst trouble we encountered resulted from two rough weather trips in October. They gave valuable experience as to the capabilities of our boats, but were incredibly unpleasant and frightening at the time.

The first was brought about by an air-sea rescue trip. The unfortunate crew of a bomber crashed into the sea twenty miles from the Dutch coast half-way between Flushing and the Hook. It was at night and there had been a very strong westerly wind which had eased to force 5 or 6; the sea was piling up on the Dutch coast, it was not known whether the crew survived the crash. All that had been received was a W/T signal just before the bomber had landed in the water, giving an approximate position and calling for help.

The only boats that could possibly make it were the gunboats; they were sent. It was bright, moonlight, we were going down wind. As we drew away from the land at 30 knots the seas began to mount and break, the boats to swoop and stagger in their flight. I looked apprehensively at the little white ensign at our yardarm. It was flying out stiffly ahead. We were doing 30 knots. That meant a 35 to 40 m.p.h. wind. Not good enough, I thought, and looked still more apprehensively at the rising seas. The boats were beginning to surge badly now; drawing up sharply as the stern lifted to a steep following sea, the engines grinding and jarring as the revs. came down despite their thousands of horsepower driving and thrusting the hull into the hollow of the wave. The next moment, like a racing car released by the starting gun, they would be hurtling forward at what seemed to be breakneck speed, on the foaming crest of a wave, the entire forward half of the boat clear of the water and the spray flying mast high from the wide thrown bow wave.

The decision, whether to go on or not in circumstances such as these, is one of the most difficult I have had to face. To go on close to the enemy coast with a strong onshore wind and sea, was to risk our boats seriously. The return journey, banging into the waves, imposes the severest strain on hulls and machinery and is the time when engines, transmission or underwater gear is likely to go, and it is likewise the time when, if any of these do fail, the boat and crew would be lost. Also the chances of seeing a rubber dinghy in those conditions, assuming there was one to be seen, were about a thousand to one.

But there might be men in a dinghy, men whose condition branded itself upon the imagination like a cruel vision; without hope except for our efforts. There was no passing the responsibility. Unless we tried no one else would or could. Moreover, going down wind with a bright moon we had, comparatively speaking, good visibility. There was just that outside chance of seeing something, if we took the risk.

We kept on. As we neared the Dutch coast the big seas were piling up, steep precipitous declivities with angry breaking crests. The "climbing" (as we called the laboured struggle of the boat from the trough to the summit of the wave) and the forward-surfing were becoming intensely pronounced, making station-keeping a matter of great difficulty and danger. At one moment a following boat might swoop right by, as the leader struggled up the back of a wave, at another he might be dropped two or three cables astern as the other lurched madly forward on a steep, irresistible pinnacle. When it is realized that it was impossible to prevent the boats yawing between an arc of 30 to 40 degrees, the grave danger of collision will be appreciated. Collision in those conditions must almost certainly have produced fatal results.

Every now and then a boat would take off on the top of a wave, career along without warning, drop sharply into the trough ahead, the bluff bows thrusting solidly into the opposing wall of water. The boat would shudder throughout her length, in the dustbin men would be flung violently against the forward bulkhead, a great wave of green water would roll solidly along the foredeck and break against the wheelhouse coaming, filling

the dustbin and sweeping away along the open decks on either side.

Thus we swooped and staggered to the eastward. At one moment foaming along on a crest, at another seemingly stopped and stumbling in the depths, the wet decks glistening in the moonlight, the dripping gun barrels glinting darkly against the moon-path, the tumbled seas forming fantastic patterns of light and shade as the cold light was thrown back to the eye from one wall of water and cut off from another, leaving a black gaping pit; at one moment divided by a sharp peak from all sight of the other boats, at another lifted on high and maybe looking down on the swept decks of one's companions. With this opposing sequence of physical sensations came alternating exhilaration and anxiety of mind. At one moment exalted and excited by the wild beauty of the scene, the pricking sense of adventure; at another filled with apprehension and misgiving, fumbling ceaselessly but indecisively with the manifold risks and hazards of the situation.

We carried on well past the position given. There was nothing more we could do. Reluctantly we turned and instantly our whole world was about our ears.

Revs. were cut to the minimum; at any speed above 10 knots the boats would have dropped off a wave and broken their backs. Visibility virtually ceased. Spray and solid water continuously sheeted the hulls mast high. At least seventy miles before we could hope for any lee. Seven hours of physical hell and intense mental strain. We were soaked at once, nothing could keep it out effectively. The boat reared and dropped, seemingly struck by an endless succession of giant hammer blows. Every now and then the violent up-thrust had a twisting corkscrew effect, and with the wind slightly on the starboard bow, the boat landed with a shattering thud on her port side. It seemed that the port gun must come through the deck. It seemed that the bottom must be stove in. It seemed that the engine holding-down-bolts must shear under the succession of grievous shocks to which they were subjected. And anyway, where were we getting to? With the compass card thrown through 90°, and the impossibility of judging what speed the boat was making through the water,

sometimes apparently stopped short by a specially vicious crest, the dead reckoning position was a matter of guess-work.

Though the mind played with the difficulties and dangers of such a situation, raising in endless succession images of the disasters that could occur, it was one form of the physical discomfort that provided the culminating blow. Headed into the wind the eyes were facing a 50-mile-an-hour gale. Spray, hard and solid, was coming over continuously, driven viciously with the full force of the wind against the forward motion of the boat, slapping, slapping, slapping against the eye-balls. However you looked, attempt to dodge it how you would, your eyes were stung and stung hard. It hit you until the sheer physical pain of it made you so angry that you would swear out loud and senselessly, as one turns round in a rage and kicks a stone over which one has tripped. But the slap slapping may go on for five, seven, maybe ten hours on end.

Soon after this trip we had another of the same sort, caused by a sudden blow when we had gone south-east to a position off the West Hinder bank. The shallow water and numerous banks of that part of the North Sea caused desperately steep and dangerous waves for small boats. "Bussy" Carr carried away his mast, which snapped off short with the banging, thereby closing down his W/T; then he lost visual contact as was almost inevitable in the conditions. I remember having an anxious night imagining Bussy out of control and drifting fast on to the enemy shore. There was nothing I could do; he turned up in the morning battered but not seriously damaged. It was upon this occasion that David James made one of the better signals. The port gun was positioned directly over the officers' lavatory, or "heads" as it is called in the navy. Receiving an outstanding crack on the way out at speed, the gun broke through the deck. James sent a signal:

"Damaged by weather, port gun now in heads. Request permission to return to harbour."

He was lucky, he escaped a very unpleasant night.

The autumn wore on with rough weather and no success, until

our action in November which I have described in the beginning of this book. I hope that this brief outline of our beginnings in gunboats will have shown why that action, not specially noteworthy in itself, was of considerable importance to us in the position we were then in.

It gave us new confidence in ourselves. More important still, it revived outside interest in the small fast gunboat at a time when this had nearly vanished.

We heard that a new class of boat was coming along, similar to the old one except that having studied their failings, the designer had corrected the faults. . . . This was something like a gunboat; when we first heard of it we could hardly believe that it could be true.

Having heard of this boat through Lieutenant Perry, later to become our engineer officer, at that time working in a shore billet and realizing at once that this was exactly what we wanted, I decided to ask for the first flotilla.

In the end I got it and George Bailey brought the first boat to *Beehive* in April; we got the rest going quickly in May, June and July of that year. They were to come fully up to our expectations.

We settled down to our patrols again, occasionally involving operations far afield; to its hardships and delights, its hard work and pleasures, its humours and disappointments.

The weather was much of it rough and training rather than operating therefore loomed large. We had had two actions in the winter and they had taught us many things. Chiefly that guns will jam unless they are in perfect shape and their ammunition likewise; the type and amount of grease and oil applied could make all the difference between a perfectly working gun and a hopeless jam; this could be the difference between life and death for us.

I called my flotilla together and pointed this out. There was no easy way out for gunboats. If we were to have success we must fight for it. I told them plainly that we intended to seek out and engage the enemy; that unless their guns continued to fire and fire straight it would be they who would be killed and not the enemy. The alternatives were success or death. They must be efficient.

That talk, I believe, had a profound effect. Certainly thereafter we had no difficulty in keeping all the guns and ammunition in the flotilla in excellent condition, and the keenness for target practice and improving the gunnery was manifest.

The early months of 1942 passed without further incident of special interest so far as we were concerned; the next land-mark in our E-boat warfare was to be in the spring. Meanwhile another M.G.B. flotilla, also operating on the East Coast, had a great success.

While returning from an operation, three of them under their S.O., Lieutenant Horne, R.N., ran into a single E-boat returning as the first light made. They engaged her and shot her to pieces, causing her to slow down and surrender after twenty minutes' running fight. All her officers had been killed.

Horne closed to lay his boat alongside and, an admirable example of the contrariness of warfare, as they neared with guns trained and tommy guns and hand grenades at the ready, the first lieutenant jumped, missed his footing, and fell into the water clutching the guard-rail of the E-boat from which somewhat ignominious position he was politely rescued by a member of the German crew.

This action, coupled with previous ones, made the E-boats look very askance on motor gunboats. These small fast craft hit them hard and suddenly out of the blue; they never knew where they were going to be caught, near the convoy route, in the middle of the North Sea, off their own harbour mouths. It was most disconcerting. I am convinced that the steady hard work of patrols, apart from the engagements, trip after trip without making contact often in appalling weather, was not without its value. The E-boats became aware that they were being hunted by small fast boats that might pounce on them at any time and any place, and they did not like it. It made them cautious and ultimately caused them to cut down their operations considerably. This was basically the value of gunboats, rather than the extent of destruction wrought on the E-boats. The E-boats were too numerous and too elusive for us to hope to destroy them to any crippling extent, but if we could scare them and cut down their operating, we were

WE FOUGHT THEM IN GUNBOATS

achieving our object. Our Jutland for mastery of the narrow seas could not be fought in one great battle, flotillas of gunboats versus flotillas of E-boats, the winners to have complete mastery. It could be, and was, only achieved by continuous patrol and search, and numerous small fights.

Whatever else may be said on the subject, the grind of patrols was essential, it was our war, and without it we could not have made contact on the occasions that we did. It made seamen of us, so that we could handle our boats and fight them when the occasion arose.

E-boats' successes in the winter of 1941-42 had been greatly less than in the previous winter, and we liked to think that the gunboats had played their part in bringing about this reduction.

We were soon to have further concrete evidence of the value of our little craft, of the weapon that we had forged and were slowly perfecting.

C H A P T E R

5

THE STORY OF THE NEXT ACTION starts four days before the actual clash. The setting was somewhat dramatic.

Early in April we had reason to suppose that a flotilla of E-boats had moved to a certain harbour with a view to operating from there.

Being conveniently stationed at *Beehive* we were given the job of looking out for them. We hunted for them several times in the early part of the month, but nothing happened. Then there was a period of rough weather, at least a week during which nothing could happen.

Then at ten o'clock on a Monday morning all gunboats were suddenly called to "immediate notice."

We were told to proceed forthwith to a position on the convoy route, to assist a ship that had been badly damaged:

We sped away, four of us, and soon found the stricken ship despite low visibility. She was wallowing low in the water. Towing assistance was on its way; all we could do was to take off the badly wounded men and bring them swiftly to hospital.

I remember vividly the scene on board. The ship stopped, rolling gently but heavily owing to the weight of water forward, the little groups of sailors on the deck, the dark shambles below decks, the badly wounded men being brought up from below, covered in fuel oil, many seriously burnt; one man taken aboard my boat was livid purple wherever his flesh was exposed, his face and bald head a horrible sight. . . .

We roared back with our load of burnt and lacerated flesh. We

knew then more certainly than ever that our hunt for E-boats was worth while.

Through the boom at high speed (no little pleasure in this as the boom trawlers always delighted in waving us down even when we were doing our usual 10 knots past them), and on to the base where we landed our cargo.

We went out that night in a very vengeful mood. But the E-boats were celebrating their success and we waited in vain.

Tuesday dawned fine and clear. We returned in the early morning to fuel and wait for the night. The weather remained flat calm, perfect for our purpose. That night we mustered four boats. There seemed every chance of an action. The E-boats had been rested, the weather was right, they would want to repeat their success.

We sailed at 7.30 in the evening.

We had to rely on hearing the enemy as it would be a dark night. It was all important to catch them and stop them getting to the convoy route. At all costs we must intercept.

My unit comprised Bussy Carr and George Duncan and Cowley. Bussy had not had much experience as a C.O. at this time, and had only been in action as a first lieutenant; of an artistic nature and not by inclination very energetic, he yet managed in some effortless way to keep his boat in perfect order and do all that was asked of him; the secret probably being that his crew adored him. Fearless and Resolute George (Duncan) was the exact opposite, yet produced the same results. Intensely active and distinctly addicted to the parade ground manner, his boat was run in true gunnery style, whistles blowing and alarm bells sounding continually. He had taken part in one previous battle in command and before that as a first lieutenant. If ever a man was anxious to get at the enemy it was Fearless and Resolute George. Cowley (Kelly to his friends), the most junior C.O. in the flotilla, had only been in action as Howes's first lieutenant. Small and slight, with a large nose, generally referred to as the "Dreaded Beak," and a fearsome pipe the smell from which was calculated to turn all stomachs but its owner's, he was always being twitted for being behind station and losing contact. This

was quite unjustified, but it clung to him and in later days a boat returning one evening met a unit of the flotilla going to sea, and made the classic remark that he had "met the flotilla and Kelly."

The unit swept along in the gathering gloom, the rumbling roar of the exhausts spreading away in gradually diminishing waves to a distance of fifteen to twenty miles on all sides over the still water. Low dull clouds formed to the west and south bringing the darkness down rapidly.

Swinging along through the gathering darkness the mind's activity seems suspended, hypnotized by the sameness of the ever-changing particles of water thrown steadily from the hull, and the never varying wall of darkness ahead with its floor of unbroken smooth sea. The thoughts wander, though the mind is ready and alert to the slightest hint of change, change which implies danger or the necessity for instant exertion.

On this occasion I had a presentiment of action to come, brought about no doubt by the extreme probability of E-boat attack that night. Thus over-shadowed, my mind lingered over the recent parting with my family. My wife and younger son, Antony, were at the base, my older boy, Bobby, having recently returned to his preparatory school. My wife mercifully was able to school herself into a stoic absence of alarm at my doings, the only possible outlook, and our good-byes were strictly unemotional and informal. But I always found the goodnight kiss to my youngest son a little trying when I knew I was set upon some specially likely venture. He was so very happy, so very unaware of what was going on. It was not easy.

In his fifth year he was at a particularly attractive age. My thoughts dwelt delightedly on his latest *bon mot*; his mother had been reading to him and having finished a chapter had stopped, saying that it was time for his bath. Antony had not wanted to go to bed yet, and, intrigued with the book, had urged for more reading: "Please go on, -Mummy," he had said in his most winning voice, "It's so very inquisitive."

I thought absently of the fun it would be giving him an empty shell case if we had an action that night and I got home intact.

I could see so clearly his up-turned excited little face and hear his pleased exclamation: "Oo! thanks, Dad."

Oh well, there was no harm in thinking about it, but no use getting down in the mouth. It was for such as Antony that we, and myself in particular, were fighting this war. All the more reason for getting at the enemy.

A voice broke into my reverie, Head's:

"Two more minutes to go before the second division splits off, sir."

The box lamp winked and the second division turned away to starboard.

The sparkling wake flying back from the chine seemed to gather momentum with the closing in of darkness, the shortening range of focus increasing the appearance of speed. A few minutes later throttles were eased, engines cut. In the ensuing comparative quiet the throb of the other unit's engines could be heard clearly now five miles to the south-west. Then absolute silence. Such stillness as a windless night at sea alone can give.

We listened. Surely they would come tonight. Cocky with their success, the bastards! Those poor burnt limbs and faces! If only we could prevent that, and kill some of them too! If only? We were a tiny force, it would almost certainly mean they would outgun us by nine to one. But that devastated flesh like peeled pomegranates was vivid and searing to the mind. Nothing should hold us back if they came.

We had stopped at ten o'clock. At 10.35 I suggested having some sandwiches and coffee as we waited in the "dustbin."

"We may not have much time later on," I added. And I was right.

George Bailey, who was with me as a passenger, held the cups and I unscrewed the thermos top. As I did so the faintest steady whispering beat fell upon our ears like the rhythmic rustle of a flowing ball dress; the sound came from the south'ard. We stayed motionless, intent, the coffee and cups held poised, forgotten. Thus we must have remained for a minute or more. No longer was needed, the sound and its portent had become unmistakable.

"Put away the coffee," I said quietly, "we shan't want it yet awhile."

Curiously that little remark, indicating that the fight was on, was to spring to mind whenever we recalled this action.

Noiselessly and swiftly the men went to their "action stations" and donned tin hats. The noise was a mixture of the throb of silenced engines and the splash of fast thrown washes; the E-boats were not far off. The bearing of the sound was altering fast, they were evidently going to pass quite close to the westward of us, that is on the side away from our other unit. As I raked the darkness with my glasses I gave the necessary orders.

To Bussy Carr: "E-boats coming up from the south, passing to the eastward of us. I shall wait till they are level. Stand by to start up."

To Head: "Warn the engineroom to stand by. Action stations. Pass a position to the tel."

To Roberts, the tel.: "Call Duncan and say 'E-boats to the eastward. Join us. Course north 60° east.' Then make an enemy report with our position and say that 'We are engaging E-boats in position . . .'"

They were almost level with us now, the sibilant murmur and muffled throb very close; I could not see them though it seemed I must, still I was sure of catching them.

I lowered the glasses.

"Well. Here we go. Course north 75° east, coxswain. Start up." (This last shouted for the benefit of Bussy.)

The engines burst into life in quick succession, the boats swung round to port and steadied. The throttles were lifted swiftly; the roar of the engines reverberated. I for one had a queer feeling in the pit of the stomach, but what man, determined upon performing an unpleasant duty, has not? The more determined the man the deeper the sinking sensation, to vanish like a mirage as action is joined, and vital concentration required.

I am willing to wager that Nelson, the embodiment of determination, with his sustained and impassioned urge to make contact with the enemy however disadvantageous the odds, felt these qualms as his 74-gun ship of the line slowly closed the

enemy squadron, maybe in sight of each other for many hours before battle would be joined. It is known that he often took refuge in prayer on such occasions; this has resulted in one of the finest human appeals to the Almighty ever penned, Nelson's last entry in his diary before the battle of Trafalgar:

"May the Great God whom I worship, Grant to my Country and for the benefit of Europe in General, a great and Glorious Victory, and may no misconduct in anyone tarnish it, and may humanity after Victory be the predominant feature in the British Fleet. For myself individually I commit my life to Him Who made me, and may His blessing light upon my endeavours for serving my Country faithfully. To Him I resign myself and the just cause which is entrusted me to Defend. Amen. Amen. Amen."

I was standing on the canopy now by the mast, straining into the darkness with the glasses. It was not more than three or four minutes before I saw them. They were in line ahead, one, two, three, four; I could see no more, but knew there were some as the white wash stretched out ahead in the gloom. Big fellows they looked too at that distance, about four cables. I jumped down:

"There they are right ahead. Steer 70, coxswain," I said as I increased speed. I did not want to open fire until we had got in close, where the surprise we hoped to effect would yield greater results; but almost as the words left my mouth the enemy's guns spoke, a single brilliant stream of light tearing towards us, then another and another. Someone had been keeping a damned good lookout aft.

A tornado of fire was blasting at us now as we tore into the enemy line, the sky seemed alight with hurling meteors and comets, but we were a low, difficult target, half covered by our great white pressure wave thrown high round the boat. The whine of the enemy shells passing close by could be heard clearly above the bellow of our engines and the intermittent crash of our own guns. We had closed to within a cable or less now of the rear boat of the line. Edwards and Barnes were doing good execution. The bursts of our shells on the E-boat's hull were plainly visible. We were flying along still closing, heading him off. The E-boat next

in line loomed up dead ahead, seemingly vast and menacing with her guns flashing.

"Port wheel!"

"Steady!"

We levelled out on her course and turned all our attention to her, leaving the one we had just passed to Bussy.

"Starboard a little."

We swung towards, closing again fast. The E-boat broke away to starboard; again we were confronted with a third E-boat ahead. Bussy, engaging the rearmost E-boat, which, turned away, lost contact with us; this was inevitable in his first action in command, at the tremendous pace of the fight and subject to the intense volume of fire, making visibility well-nigh impossible with the blinding tracer.

By this time we had been hit severely. The starboard gun was hit hard while the crew were reloading. Two hands had fallen, wounded, and the gun was out of action. Repeatedly the thud of enemy shells hitting the hull could be heard and felt above the general uproar. Bailey, who was standing beside me, received a splinter below his right eye, harmless except for a profusion of blood. Stung by this, he proceeded to wreak vengeance on the Hun with a stripped Lewis gun.

The third E-boat broke off also, and again we found ourselves charging yet a fourth. So it went on up the line until we had engaged and headed off the whole formation of six enemy vessels.

As we swept round to starboard with the sixth boat, at last we found the way clear and no enemy vessel across our bow. They had fled away to the eastward in confusion, making smoke. Almost immediately we lost them in the smoke and darkness, now that they were no longer on a steady course. Would they run for home, or reform and try to carry on towards our convoy route?

The answer to that question would indicate the measure of the fright we had given them. We knew we had hit them pretty hard.

Edwards had been wonderfully cool with his gun, firing short bursts and only when he knew he could hit. He realized it was essential to keep that gun going at all costs.

The only way to find out what the enemy was doing was to cut

and listen. This we did, but at once I realized it was hopeless until we had collected our own boats, since they were bumbling around making a terrific noise in an endeavour to come up with the action.

After much flashing of lights we all made contact and engines were cut. We listened expectantly. Yes, there it was. A distant murmur away to the eastward, almost due east. That was indecisive information; it meant they were probably reforming, and it was impossible to tell whether they would then make another bid to get through to the convoy route, or whether they would run for home.

The essential thing was to stop them getting on to the convoy route. If we went north-east at top speed for six miles or so and then cut, we should be certain of being fairly near to them if they were attempting to go on and would have them close by. If they turned for home, we should hear them only in the distance to the south and probably fail to catch them again. But the essential need was to stop them getting through, therefore the run to the north-east was the correct manoeuvre.

We formed up and sped away. The excitement was intense. Would they come on again? If so, they would find a much stronger force this time, with almost fresh boats, and one damaged but still able to fight. I had ascertained from Bussy that his boat was all right, hardly hit at all and no casualties. She had been lucky.

There was time now to take stock of my own boat. She was a shambles. Five of the crew were casualties—half the ship's company—several of them seriously hit and one obviously dying. The starboard gun was shattered, there were gaping holes in the canopy, the hull was holed in thirteen places; some large gaping gashes, others no bigger than your fist where a shell had penetrated and burst inside. The decks were slippery with blood and oil. Luckily, because we had been heading towards our enemies' almost throughout the action, nearly all the shell holes were forward and had burst in the living quarters. Mercifully none below the water line.

Head reported the state of the ship below decks and the condition of the wounded men, asking for morphia. This I produced

from my pocket, where I always kept plenty when at sea, a wise precaution as I found on more than one occasion. Head and Barnes looked after the wounded manfully.

Meanwhile I sent a signal reporting that we were pursuing the enemy eastward and trying to re-engage them.

We reached our selected position and stopped the engines, slumping to silence instantly before the way was off the boats, as the flotilla had been trained to do when hunting E-boats where seconds might count.

A moment's tense expectancy; then a slow spreading relaxation. There was no nearby clear sound, only a very distant faint murmur to the south. The enemy had had enough, they were going home.

"They're going back to Ostend," I shouted to Duncan. "We'll chase them in, we might pick up a straggler. Start up."

We were off again pressing south. We might catch some of them and beat them up again, but they had a good lead.

Roberts dispatched another signal reporting the enemy were still in retreat with us pursuing them.

The coxswain took the opportunity of serving out a tot of rum. I remember drinking a little of the strong black liquid out of a cup as I stood in the dustbin, peering ahead into the increasing darkness; I did not like it, though it gave out a glowing warmth.

The visibility was coming down rapidly. With the dark clouds that had been gathering to the south-west had come a gentle southerly breeze, bringing with it a steadily increasing mist. Presently we could not see each other more than fifty yards off and had to decrease speed. This was bad luck as it gave the E-boats every chance to escape. When we had run down to an estimated position three miles off the enemy coast we stopped. I dared not carry on further in that visibility. We had no echo sounders, and after an action it was impossible to be sure of one's dead reckoning position to within a few miles.

As we stopped we heard a low mutter to the south, and after a few minutes this ceased rather abruptly. It seemed certain that the E-boats had got into harbour.

I remembered some remarks of the first captain I had served

under in the war, an R.N. Commander of active mind and unusually wide outlook. He had interesting theories about the German as a fighting man and a seaman. They had wonderful ships and equipment, knew how to work their gear, were efficient and as a nation undoubtedly brave, yet somehow they failed in open battle at sea. The German's immediate reaction, whatever the odds in his favour, was to turn away and run for his well-defended harbours. In view of the undoubted bravery displayed by the Germans on land, my captain's conclusion was that there was something about fighting at sea that affected him adversely. Being primarily a central European the average German had not the sea in his blood. To fight effectively at sea you must first be happy and feel natural at sea. The call of the sea must be in your veins. England has this heritage. Even the soldiers felt secure when they reached the beaches at Dunkirk. If they could get to sea they felt they were all right, whereas the Germans showed their outlook by dropping leaflets giving a sketch of the B.E.F. hemmed in at Dunkirk and calling on them to surrender as they were "in a hopeless position, surrounded and with their backs to the sea."

As I reviewed the events of the night I reflected that there seemed much truth in these theories. When I considered the cool and unflinching bearing of my men in the recent bitter encounter, many of them removed by but a few months from peaceful occupation ashore in garages, factories, fields or machine-shops, the full import of our sea heritage was brought home to me. These men had a thousand years of naval tradition behind them and the sea in their blood.

My boat was no longer much of a fighting unit, riddled with holes, few guns working and only half the crew left; it was important to try to get the wounded back quickly for treatment. I decided to transfer to Duncan's boat and let Bailey take my boat back to harbour. It was just after midnight. I called Duncan alongside and taking Roberts with me went aboard. Bailey turned north and roared away into the night; with her stern towards us we heard her for fifteen miles.

I sent the last signal of the night, stating that the enemy had

entered harbour and I, was patrolling nearby. I also reported Bailey's return with our casualties.

Roberts was on top of his form. He had the air to himself, as there were no other E-boats out and everyone was interested in us alone for the time being.

Indeed we all were a bit cocky. We had driven off and put to flight a vastly superior enemy force and done our duty as gunboats. Sitting impudently off his harbour entrance, daring him to come out again, we felt rather like Rikkitikkitavi must have done after he had performed his function as a mongoose in fighting and killing the great cobra Nag and was waiting and watching for his still more dangerous spouse Nagaina.

The E-boats did not renew the assault that night or for many days. In fact they did not work from that area again but moved to fresh fields and pastures new.

I have two other memories of this action. I had occasion to attend a conference not very long after. The Chief of Staff discussed the engagement and ended up by saying:

"Since then we have had reports of several German bodies washed up in the Command. They are definitely E-boat personnel as they all have the distinctive uniform of the E-boat crews."

We had exacted some revenge for the men blown to bits by the E-boat on Sunday.

The other memory is the reverse side of the picture. A funeral party at a cemetery, where we buried our dead. A clear, cold, windy day. The flag-covered coffins, the red, white and blue bright in the clear sunlight, the puffs of smoke blown swiftly from the rifle muzzles of the firing party, the age-old words of the funeral service: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." A sobering memory with which to close the account. Our comrades were at peace. We were left to fight on.

ON ONE OCCASION DURING THIS PERIOD we had a narrow escape from disaster. We were operating off the Dutch coast. We had run our D.R. down, and about four miles short of our estimated position where we expected to see a buoy, we had picked up a flashing light dead ahead. It was never certain whether the buoy was going to be lit or not, and its characteristic was not known for sure. We assumed that this was our buoy. We ran on the additional four miles by which time the light seemed quite close, four or five cables off, if it were a pretty bright buoy, and stopped.

There we lay for the rest of the night, undisturbed. The tide and wind drift according to our reckoning had set us several miles to the north-west, to seaward of the buoy, which we could see throughout the night, flashing steadily but getting gradually less bright.

Before we returned, I decided to have a run in towards the coast to see if we could flush any patrol vessels and beat them up.

We set off. It was still pitch dark and there were four of us. We thundered steadily towards the coast. I intended to run up until the buoy light was on the beam, and then carry on for eight miles. That would bring us to within two miles of the shore. If we had sighted nothing, we would swing round and get out of it.

We went on and on. I watched the light, at first carelessly, and then more closely. I supposed it was drawing on the beam, but devilish slowly. I checked the rev. counters. Yes, we were doing 30 knots. I asked how many minutes we had been going. Already eleven minutes. Five and a half miles, and that blessed light was

not yet abeam, didn't seem to have shifted bearing a great deal. We certainly must have drifted much further than I thought.

How many minutes now? Fifteen. Seven and a half miles and still we hadn't reached that light. Besides, surely it was getting very bright? Thus, starting with a false premise, I fooled myself and had nearly met with disaster, since in a few minutes all four boats would have landed up on the enemy coast at speed.

Luckily my sense of anxiety overcame my blindness just in time. After we had been travelling for twenty-three minutes towards the land, and had still not got the light on our beam, but very nearly, I realized that something must be wrong. Our D.R. and estimate of drift could not be that much out.

We turned and in doing so our exhausts faced landwards, and being heard above the off-shore wind, the light went out.

Then I realized what had happened, and how narrow had been our escape. The light that we had mistaken for the comparatively dim light of the buoy was a powerful lighthouse, visible at fourteen to seventeen miles. It was an easy mistake to make at first. The light had never been on before, and we could not expect such a distant bright beacon. But the distance run towards it and the greatly brightening light should have warned me in plenty of time. As it was I had gone on in fatuous determination to put the light on the beam, lulled into a false sense of security by the original incorrect estimate of the light. I nearly succeeded; had I done so we should have all been prisoners of war.

There is, however, much truth in the saying that, at sea, it is more important to be lucky than to be clever.

There was another incident connected with this period, which was discreditable so far as I was concerned. We had lain off the Dutch coast all night, hoping for some convoy or patrol to put in an appearance. Towards dawn, utterly bored with the inaction, I had decided to carry out an offensive sweep close along the coast, despite the terrific noise we should put up at speed, making any form of surprise quite impossible.

We carried out our run without finding anything, the only result being multitudes of searchlights and flares from the shore. I had left it until late. Just as dawn was breaking, and we were

about to speed away from the coast to avoid air-attack, David James's boat had an engine breakdown. This meant a delay and then a maximum speed of 18 knots. We just got out of sight of land as broad daylight was on us, and then the boat had to stop again for some minor adjustment. These delays are rather exasperating for an S.O. The safety of the boats is his responsibility. I had been caught out taking a chance and had been put in an awkward position by the breakdowns. To make matters worse, the weather was blowing up rapidly; in a rough sea we were at a disadvantage against aircraft, and we had stirred them up properly with our recent close-in sweep.

In addition to this, you cannot know what is going on aboard the delaying boat, you cannot see the trouble for yourself, and all you can do is to persuade yourself that they are doing all that is possible, and endeavour to stifle your restlessness.

I was doing the best I could in this line, but the night had been a considerable strain, and to an impatient nature such as mine, it was difficult to restrain a growing feeling of irritability towards the erring boat, however much I may have realized at heart that they were doing all in their power.

At last David flashed O.K., and off we set at our 18 knots. As soon as I had settled the throttles, I looked back, as I always do, to see that all were in place. There was not a sign of David.

I immediately flashed an aldis lamp astern, which should have been visible in the gathering light at a considerable distance. There was no response.

Utterly exasperated, I stopped the unit again, and flashed continually on the bearing where I supposed he must be. After several minutes there was an answering light, and a moment later David appeared. I flashed him:

"What is the matter?"

The answer came back:

"Nothing."

So I stopped her and I regret to say poured out the vials of my wrath upon the unfortunate David's head.

We went on and immediately I felt very ashamed of myself. It transpired later that David's coxswain had, in some extra-

ordinary way, turned the boat 180° while David was raising his throttles, and not looking out. Consequently when he looked out again, he could see no one, and it took him a little time to realize that he was hastening in the wrong direction.

It was an inept piece of work, but the sort of thing that may happen to anyone, and I felt very badly about my loss of temper and slating of David in front of everyone.

I am firmly of the opinion that the essence of being a good officer and leader of men is never to give an unfair, hasty answer or decision, and never to lose your temper and indulge in extravagant abuse, particularly with anyone who is doing his best.

If an officer or rating is deliberately neglecting his duty or insubordinate, he may have to be dealt with harshly. But such was not the case here.

I had offended against my own cardinal rules and let myself down badly.

There is nothing like learning from mistakes; I never forgot this incident and it often helped to restrain me in later days, when my natural impatience at delay or stupidity was tending to get the better of me.

After a time it became obvious that the E-boats had deserted Ostend. This and certain other considerations moved the scope of our operations further north.

Lieutenant (Harpy) Lloyd, R.N., was by this time a S.O. at *Beehive*. On one occasion I remember going off the enemy coast in the first of the improved M.G.Bs., with several of the old flotilla, while a party under Lloyd was also operating further down the coast. It was, as so often, a flat, calm night, and the thunder of our approach, reverberating across the still, smooth water, could be heard up to twenty miles on all sides.

We got to our position and stopped. In the stillness we could hear Lloyd's boats bumbling away in the distance, then the noise of their engines ceased.

Almost immediately a great uproar started from the direction of the shore. The heavy cracking thud of large guns, 4-inch

at least, and the yellowy-green bursts of starshell. At first we thought it was an air attack, as the sound of aircraft had preceded it, and that it was shore batteries firing; but presently we heard a deep underwater thud, followed immediately by the criss-cross of distant low-level tracer. Then we knew that Harpy had run into something right away; we started up and sped towards the scene of activity, almost immediately getting an enemy report. But the firing was short-lived, lasting only about three minutes; by the time we arrived some fifteen minutes later we found nothing, and so swept away to the eastward, in which direction we thought the enemy most likely to have moved.

What had happened was this. Two German torpedo boats, 600-ton vessels like small destroyers, mounting 4-inch guns, and several E-boats, had been on patrol on the convoy route. They had been able to plot the M.T.B's. course, and exact approach, by the engine noise. Harpy ran steadily on towards them and then stopped. The Germans, realizing that they were not going to get any further help as to the position of the enemy from the sound, and knowing the M.T.Bs. to be close, at once put up starshell and endeavoured to engage.

The M.T.Bs., in spite of being themselves surprised, instead of the other way about, as should have been the case according to all the rules of war, were fortunate in being very well placed for attack. Tom Neil found a torpedo boat right opposite him in the light of the starshells. He promptly fired and secured a direct hit, probably sinking the German vessel out of hand. But he didn't wait to see, as the situation was distinctly hot and he could do no more good. Lloyd also fired at the other torpedo-boat, but probably missed. Then under the increasing hail of enemy shells, the M.T.Bs. disengaged at full speed to the north-west. They were fortunate in getting away with only minor damage, one officer killed and two hands wounded. A very successful exchange in the circumstances. The whole thing was over in little more than five minutes.

We drew a blank that night and for some time to come. There seemed to be practically no enemy shipping about, and in the quiet weather of early summer we roamed all round the Dutch

coast and could find no target. Often we roused the enemy searchlights, shore batteries fired on us, but they would not send out the E-boats to give battle.

Meanwhile we had our troubles. One was the danger of gassing the engine-room crews. There was always a grave danger of this from little leaks in the exhaust system resulting in a quantity of carbon monoxide finding its way into the engineroom. We had many quite severe cases of poisoning in the early days, and the way the engineroom crews stuck it, disregarding the danger, was greatly to their credit. Without their willing co-operation in face of this risk, we could never have used and developed the boats as we did. Only the night before, an elderly stoker named Gibbs, Captain Gibbs his messmates used to call him, the owner of much property in peacetime, had been found lying on his face passed clean out, severely gassed. The fastening of one of the exhaust pipes had broken, resulting in the pipe lifting and causing noise. Gibbs had laid flat on his stomach holding down the flap by hand. He had hung on until the fumes, coming up from the pipes, had knocked him flat. It was only the noise recurring from the released pipe that saved him, as it called attention to his condition. It is men like Gibbs who, in the last resort, save the British Empire from defeat by her enemies, and, by their quiet acceptance of any duty that may befall, enable the country to hang on to victory. Here was a man of over forty years, used to a quiet and prosperous business life in peacetime, unquestioningly lying flat on his face in a little cockleshell of a boat, at two o'clock in the morning, a few miles off the coast of Holland, hanging on to a hot exhaust pipe, until he passed clean out from carbon monoxide poisoning. And he did not consider that he was doing anything unusual or even surprising. Could keeping faith with your country go further? Fortunately for England there are many Gibbsses, but such war service might well give cause for reflection to some of his contemporaries, from black marketeers to high-placed officials, in soft jobs ashore. . . .

Lately the E-boats had seemed scared of us; but the next time we were operating we were nearly lucky enough to have a

fight. The night was dead quiet. That was bad enough, but worse was to come. As we swept over to the Dutch coast, our wash became brighter and brighter, until it was a great splash of white-green luminosity. We were in for as bad a night of phosphorescence as I remember. On such a clear, dark night as this, our hulls would normally be visible about three cables at the most, without glasses. With the creaming phosphorescent wakes we could be seen, like giant fireflies, at a distance of a mile or more.

Fifteen miles from the coast we slowed and closed the shore, slowly. Even at the reduced speed the phosphorus was shocking, lighting up the hull so brilliantly that I could read the other boat's number on her bow at more than a cable. We found two small buoys with their winking lights three or four miles from the shore, and thereby we were able to tell that we were too far to the north. As it turned out later this was fortunate. We closed the shore and when we could see it clearly, about three or four cables off, we ran south along the coast in an endeavour to locate our objective.

The noise from our engines seemed tremendous in that absolute stillness, the bright light from the phosphorus showering from the broken water at our bows, like a beacon reflected in the glossy smooth surface. It seemed certain that we must be seen or heard and we were momentarily expecting a blast from the shore. Incredible as it was, nothing happened. It was two o'clock in the morning and the Germans were fast asleep ashore.

We stopped, and the other boat carried on farther south.

Suddenly the throb of high-powered engines reverberated across the still water from the southward, followed almost at once by bright streaks of red and green tracer. Red and green; that meant British and German. Our other boat must be in trouble.

We started off, flying through a cloud of luminous wash in the general direction of the fight to the south-west. Suddenly two bright searchlights broke out close on the port quarter, streams of tracer sped from a spot on our starboard beam, but not near enough. Behind us the shore was now thoroughly roused. Search-

lights, shore batteries and their curious bobbing flares were all let loose without stint.

The firing to the southward had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The brilliant nearby searchlights on the port quarter meant a patrol close to the south, the gunfire on the starboard beam meant another a few cables to the north. I gave her the gun, and with her engines at full stretch my boat fairly stepped along. This was a moment of great exhilaration. The bellowing throb of the engines, for once filling their great brazen lungs to the maximum of their capacity, only to clear them in a deafening ear-splitting din; the vibrating, thrusting surge of power beneath our feet; the rush of wind in the face as we bored into the encircling darkness; the dangerous game of "Blindman's Buff" as we made violent alterations of course to avoid on one side the groping fingers of dazzling blue-white light, and on the other, the nearby bursts of green and yellow tracer.

We were lucky. The searchlights failed to follow us, the gunfire, directed by sound, passed harmlessly astern, since the exhaust gases, leaving the transom at over two hundred miles an hour, formed an area of maximum noise well behind the fast-driven hull.

We called up the boat and asked how she was. She replied presently that she was all right, but being closely pursued by five E-boats.

We made to her:

"Indicate course, speed and position."

We got her reply as dawn was breaking. She was doing well. This was very satisfactory, as I had been afraid that she might have lost speed and been in grave danger.

The course was the same as ours. Her position lay right in our line of advance at our relative speeds. We were in the best possible position to give her assistance if needed; there seemed every chance of our falling in with her pursuing E-boats when they turned back.

We went to action stations and licked our lips in anticipation. We would give the E-boats a run for their money anyway.

We missed them, however, and both boats got back without

further incident. It had been a close shave. We considered that we had been challenged by the enemy.

We were determined to seek them out and give battle, and mustered a considerable force.

The speedy armada roared its way across the North Sea. Just before dusk we spotted a Jim Crow, a Jerry reconnaissance plane. He did not come near; there was no doubt that he had seen us. On we rumbled. We made no attempt to dissemble or hide our approach. We swept into position and turned north-east. We churned our way up the coast, trailing our coat, sighted the wreck buoys and swinging round 180°, charged back again close in shore, to make certain we had missed no patrol.

By this time the coast was in a state of uproar. Flares, search-lights, starshells and shore batteries opening up at us all down the line. Sometimes when we were only two miles off the coast it was unpleasantly accurate; they even scored one or two unimportant hits. We could find no trace of our quarry; Jim Crow had delivered his warning, and if patrols had been out they had been withdrawn. They would not give fight. Our only satisfaction lay in the insolent challenge we had thrown down. Although we had swept the sea on the very threshold of their lairs, they had not come out. We liked to compare the turmoil there would have been at *Beehive* to get out and at them, if E-boats had been heard and sighted patrolling off the harbour mouth!

Another night sticks in my memory, I think because of the vivid contrasts it provided rather than the excitement.

The passage across was notable for a thick bank of fog. It was necessary to maintain our fast cruising speed, if possible, as there was little likelihood of anything being in the way. We took our chance.

The pale wreathing vapour close in front of the eyes, shutting down the visibility to fifty or sixty feet ahead of the lifted bows, gave the effect of a continuous turning movement, as though we were swinging steadily to port, the opposite direction to the drift of the fog. I have often noticed this before; it is quite uncanny in a small, fast-moving vessel. The impression is so strong, that

you glance continually at the compass to reassure yourself that the coxswain is not making a fantastic mistake.

This habit of checking the course continually can be very necessary. I remember once finding all of a sudden that the coxswain was steering ten degrees wrong, after keeping a steady course for several hours. We were temporarily mystified, as he assured me he was on his course, which was indeed the case. The trouble was caused by a zealous able-seaman, who, realizing that we were approaching the enemy coast, had, unperceived in the darkened wheelhouse, placed the coxswain's tin hat in a handy position near the compass.

Suddenly, as we neared the enemy coast, the sky cleared and the night changed completely in a few minutes, as in a transformation scene. The full moon was riding high in a clear sky, a fresh rising north-westerly wind was beginning to whip the sea's surface, sending out brilliant sparkles of light in the moon's path on the water.

We arrived in our correct position and settled down to a long patrol. A south running tide, added to the southerly drift of the wind, was setting us fast in shore. After some hours, as all seemed quiet, I went below for a nap.

Presently I was shaken by a somewhat excited first lieutenant. He informed me that we were quite close to the shore, that there seemed to be several large ships to the sou'ard. This was exciting news indeed; I nipped on deck quickly.

My first impressions did nothing to diminish my interest. The moon was to the south-east, as bright as I ever remember it. Silhouetted sharply in its light was the black line of the shore, giving some effect of height at its nearest point, but quickly tailing off into low sand dunes, and the horizon on either side. Almost at once I saw that the height was caused by the town, spread along the edge of the shore, the roof-tops of the larger buildings showing up distinctly from the rest.

As I swung the glasses slowly to the south-east and south, my pulse began to quicken. There were one, two, three, yes—four large blobs, separate and distinct on the horizon. They looked exactly like the upper works of ships. Here was something to get

our teeth into at last. I very nearly called up Lloyd at once, giving him the position of the enemy. Luckily some cautioning instinct restrained me. I thought it better to investigate more closely first. Then I realized that if I started up, the coast defences were certain to hear us, with the fresh in-shore breeze; the alarm would be given. There was still plenty of time, we were closing the objects slowly. I decided to wait a little and see what I could discover.

After watching for a while, I felt sure the ships were anchored. This seemed admirable for our purpose. Then a doubt began to steal over me. A curious place to anchor large ships on a moonlight night! Moreover, as we drifted nearer the shapes began to be a little odd. Could they be large isolated buildings ashore, showing up from the sand dunes, without the latter being visible?

I consulted the coast pilot, and began to lie about all over the wheelhouse roof taking bearings. Yes, the whole thing fitted in. There were churches and a signal station. I had been saved by the skin of my teeth from a comic blunder. I should not have been allowed to forget it for a long time.

Other trips had their excitements and interest, without the assistance of the enemy. There was an occasion when my boat struck a floating obstruction, I think a mine, and carried away her starboard propeller bracket and propeller.

It was in the first grey of dawn that I caught a glimpse of the large round black object, as it disappeared under the lift of the bows. My heart was in my mouth. There was nothing to be done, only wait for the explosion. The thud came as it hit the hull, but not the blast, merely tremendous vibration from a mutilated propeller. We had been very lucky; the worst we suffered was a long limping passage home; even so we covered the hundred odd miles to our base at an average of fifteen knots.

Then there was the memorable occasion when we took David James's father—a member of Parliament—for an operation. The weather was doubtful when we started; it proceeded to develop into that dreaded but fortunately rare combination in the North Sea, a fresh wind with very low visibility.

We carried out our orders, which involved a run over to the

enemy coast, a sweep up to the north, and so home; a distance of several hundred miles with no chance of checking or fixing our position. On the run home we had a fresh north-easterly wind on our starboard quarter and a big running swell, evidently harbinging of more to follow.

The visibility was patchy. At times one could see almost a mile ahead, at others not more than a hundred or two hundred yards.

As we swooped over the high surging seas, swerving from side to side of our correct course, yawing helplessly, I considered the chances of returning our visitor on time. He had to be back in the House of Commons by the early afternoon. This meant catching the ten o'clock train. It seemed exceedingly unlikely that we should make it. Even if we could hold our speed the whole way in, we should only have an hour or so to spare. The weather tended to thicken as we neared the English coast. Unless we found a buoy very quickly we should be helpless. We could not be sure of our position to five or six miles after such a long D.R. run in that weather, and might well be ten miles out. We could not risk running in over the banks.

I kept my doubts to myself, hoping for a break in the weather. Instead it got worse as we approached our landfall, a light vessel that we had left some twelve hours before. I told Head to take soundings, though I knew there was nothing distinctive against which to check the results.

As the time ran out and we had only a few minutes to go to our estimated position, Head appeared, quite excited about the results of his soundings. They fitted exactly, he said, we must be coming right up to the light vessel, should see it in one and a half minutes.

I thought to myself:

"Oh yeah? As likely as not ten miles away and the visibility under a cable."

Almost as I gave vent to this opinion we very nearly rammed the light float. There she was, right ahead, looming up over us; we had to go hard a-port to avoid her.

Such a thing seldom happens more than once in a lifetime. We took full advantage of our luck, and, knowing our position, tore

on into harbour as though it was the most natural thing in the world. I do not think that Wing-Commander James ever knew just how lucky he was to be able to keep his appointment.

We began to get the new boats in a steady stream. During the nine months that *Beehive* had been under the new Captain, the scene had changed greatly. Many of the early M.T.B. officers had gone. The gunboats had taken their proper position in the scheme of things, that is, as full equals of the M.T.Bs. Actually on account of the ubiquitous nature of their work, and because they operated more often than the M.T.Bs., they rather tended to monopolize attention for a change.

The base was now a very happy one. The boats worked hard and were keen; there was no sense of frustration. Most important of all the Captain helped and backed us to the limit in the development of our boats and equipment. This was most important to us, because ours was a new and developing form of warfare. We who were enacting it were the only people who really understood the problems. Moreover, we found that the only way to get what we wanted was to make it ourselves and show that it worked; then we had a chance of getting it taken up officially.

In every case the Captain had to stand the repercussions of such over-zealous and revolutionary behaviour. Without his willing attitude of aiding, abetting and standing by us, we could have done nothing.

With the improvement in our fighting technique and equipment, and the knowledge that gunboats had a definite and necessary place in the scheme of things, came a much more cheerful and contented disposition amongst us. This was reflected in our convivial gin parties at mid-day, later in the various social activities that were started in the base, such as the Scottish society, the rugger club, and the debating society.

The "gin sessions," as we called them, were the original social gatherings and very good fun they were too. Owing to the nature of our work we could rarely congregate and drink in the evenings. Except in rough weather we were always either at sea or at short

notice. Thus the recognized time to take a glass of gin together came to be mid-day. This was especially pleasant after being at sea the night before. Feeling agreeably weary after the night's exertions, it was most satisfying to sit crowded together in one of our little wardrooms, sipping a gin and lime, chatting indolently of this and that, very frequently shop, with the comfortable knowledge that you would be "getting your head down" (the sailor's expression for going to sleep), directly after lunch.

Many were the pleasant hours that we passed in this way, considerable was the benefit that we derived from this intercourse; a little gin is a great leveller. I remember my first captain saying that he always started a commission with a few cases of gin, that it was quite astonishing the corners it succeeded in rubbing off.

At these little parties first lieutenants and C.Os., M.T.B. and M.G.B. officers would mix with engineer officers and other members of the base staff. This did a lot of good in a pretty large and straggling ship's company such as *Beehive's*, where normally there was little chance of getting together socially. Many were the amusing and interesting conversations that filtered skywards with the warm smoke-laden atmosphere, through the canopy hatches.

What the pub is to the British workman, the gin sessions were to our little community.

"Will you come and take a glass of gin in my boat?"

or

"My boat is flying pendant 9 today,"

or

"My boat is duty drinking barge today, sir."

Thus would the invitation be issued. When the hands had consumed their rum and gone off to their dinner, sometimes five or six, sometimes twelve or more would congregate in the boat designated, and with the filling of the glasses the talk would unfold.

"I missed my tea yesterday and very nearly held up my boat," said David James as he helped himself to lime juice and water, his

normal drink at noon. "My first lieutenant only just woke me in time and I had to dash into my seagoing clothes and rush straight aboard, just as the boats were starting up to leave."

"How so?" queries Rodney Sykes, recently arrived to take a command.

"I told Mizzen to give me a shake an hour before sailing, and all he did was to stick his head in the room and call me. Needless to say this had no effect."

Mizzen was one of the porters in the mess ashore, a great character. He was an East Coast man, brought up in sail, his father having been in the same profession, and having achieved the apt surname of Mizzen, went one better and christened his son Ocean!

"But surely you didn't let him get away with that?" I said.

"No. As I was running down to the boat I met him, and asked him why the devil he hadn't shaken me," continued David. "He protested that he had called me. When I pointed out that a shout was no good and that the only thing to do was to give me a good shake he said, 'I didn't wish to be disrespectful, Sah!'"

Boffin arrived and helped himself to a gin.

"Talking about Mizzen," he said, "his weather forecasts may be all right, but it strikes me that his ship carries sail a good deal better than ours." Mizzen, who was a great authority on East Coast weather, having sailed there most of his life, had set up a rival weather bureau to the official meteorological office. He had produced a small blackboard and a miniature flag-staff, with a ball which slid up and down it. On the blackboard he drew the picture of a full-rigged ship. Daily he shortened or shook out sail upon her yards to indicate the force of wind that he anticipated; at the same time the ball was raised or lowered on its flag-staff. If it was near the top the winds would be light, if low down, Mizzen foretold a blow. Great was the rivalry between his supporters and those of Penniston Byrd, or P.B., as we called the head of the meteorological office.

Of late, however, there had been a certain cooling towards Mizzen's forecasts. The ball would be high on its staff, the ship would be displaying clouds of sail, and yet we would go out,



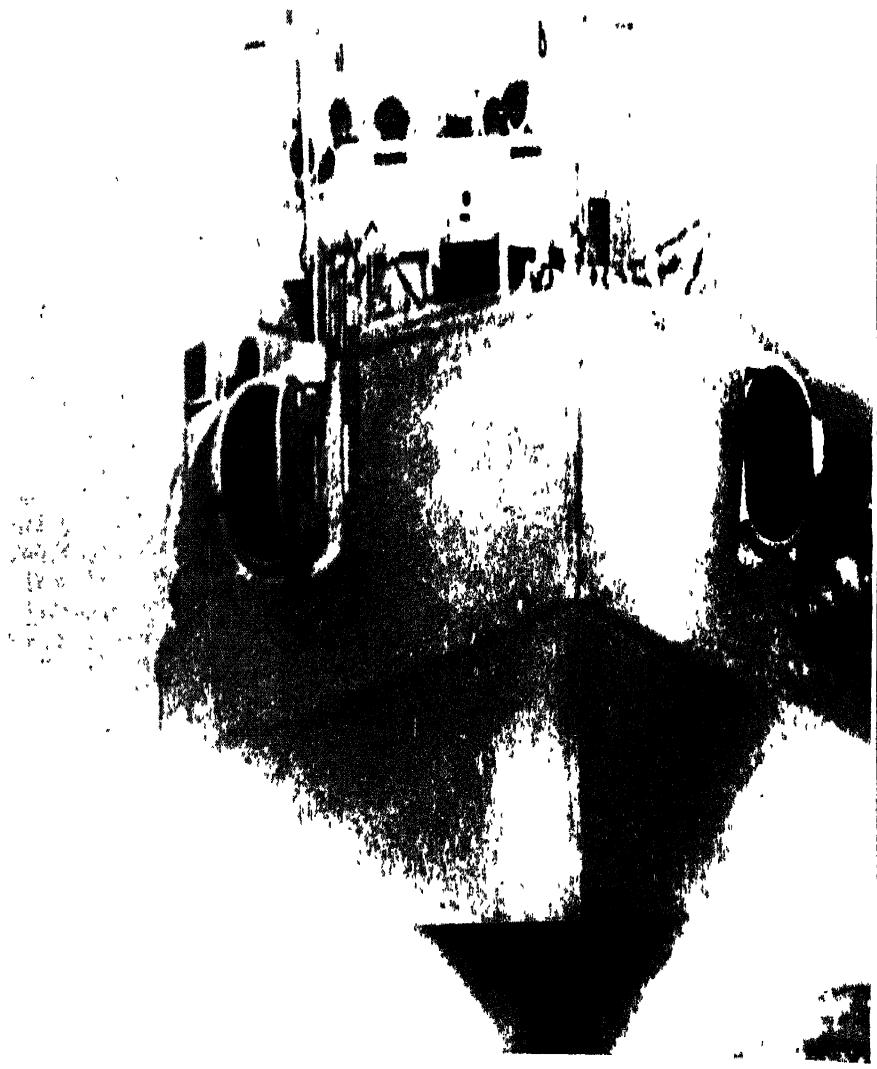
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LIEUT.-COMMANDER HICHENS AND SOME OF THE OFFICERS OF HIS FLOTILLA
IN THE OPERATIONS ROOM OF H.M.S. BEEHIVE



A GERMAN E-BOAT

spend an extremely uncomfortable night, returning from the middle of the North Sea excessively wet and knocked about.

"Yes. I quite agree," said David, "I fancy it would be a good thing if he knew where the boats went to sometimes. He seems to think we set Royals and disappear up the Thames Estuary!"

"With his knowledge of the banks off the Thames he would be a useful chap to have aboard to help keep off the putty," said Boffin.

"He probably knows where the sandbanks are!"

This was directed at Boffin, who, returning one morning from a patrol, had landed up on a sandbank, followed closely by Bussy Carr. They had only been aground for a short time. While their trouble lasted the air had been alive with cryptic comments passed between the boats, ending with Bussy's classic remark that he was going to try a depth charge as a kedge anchor!

The conversation drifted to groundings generally, a never-failing source of interest to the sailor.

"The worst mistakes are generally made when a chap thinks he's got a fix and he's really mistaken his light, or other navigational aid," I said.

"I know a man," said David, "who picked up the Casquets coming up from the south-west, thought it was the Lizard, altered south and hit the French coast."

He drowned his delighted chuckle at the unfortunate fellow's discomfiture in his glass of lime juice.

Holder piped up: "What about the chap who went aground in the Thames estuary and when asked why, said he was taking a sight of the sun."

A shout of laughter greeted this sally, and the conversation drifted off into other channels.

"I heard a lovely remark of Edwards's the other day," I said. "You know he was mentioned in dispatches for his work in the last two actions. He was joking about it in his typical manner. You know his voice, half-squeaky and half-audible tooth suck. He said 'I wonder if I shall get my letters addressed to "Able Seaman George Edwards, M.I.D.",' terrible emphasis on the 'M.I.D.'"

Rodney broke in, "I've never laughed so much in my life as when I was an O.D. in the *Warspite*. Edwards is just the sort of chap who might have invented that classic pipe about 'Hands to dinner.' "

"What was that?" Cowley, stirred to interest, broke silence for the first time.

"Haven't you heard it? 'Hands to dinner—C.W. candidates to lunch!' " (C.W. stands for Commission and Warrant, and C.W. candidates are ratings specially selected to go forward for a commission).

"What about the petty officer's pipe when getting up the rum," I said. "Up spirits, stand fast the Holy Ghost!"

Boffin shifted the subject to more serious channels.

"The other day at a private yard, I was in a hell of a hurry to get my boat out ready for operating. There was a hold up in the painting. I was talking to the painter and suggested lending a hand with a few matelots."

Boffin's boat had been under repair at a private contractor's yard, his crew standing by to take her away in a hurry, since, in the recent ideal operating weather, all possible boats were wanted.

"He absolutely blew up," Boffin continued. "The Union wouldn't stand for it. Couldn't hear of us doing their jobs. I pointed out that we needed the boat desperately, that there were such things as E-boats; that even Englishmen got bumped off under unpleasant circumstances in the enginerooms of merchant ships when their torpedoes got home. But apparently the Union hadn't heard of the war."

There was a pregnant silence, then David said bitterly, "They ought to put them all under naval discipline."

"And give them sailor's pay," added Mallite.

"Take one of them out and shoot him," I said. "That might shake them up a bit, and the country would back the Government if only they would take a firm line."

"They want a few bloody good bombs around," muttered Boffin savagely.

"If only the Government had used their tremendous powers at once, put everyone into uniform, standardized wages and en-

forced service discipline against absentees, the country would have accepted it and preferred it to the present state of affairs," said Mallite. "Besides the loss of work involved by this Union business, it's so damned unfair. There's a chap in my boat getting sailor's 21s. a week and cheap cigarettes, while his brother is earning an average of £14, a dock worker. I think it's wonderful our chaps don't suck their teeth more."

"I like the story of the Spitfire pilot and the factory hand," said Bussy. "A pilot who had been fighting in the Battle of Britain was being shown over a factory. He was talking to a man at a lathe and had asked him how much he was earning.

"£20 a week!' was the answer.

"'Christ, that's as much as I earn in a month,' said the pilot.

"'Ah, but you see we work through the alerts,' was the retort."

There was a growl of half-disgusted amusement.

"This war's all right for some!" said Cowley cheerfully.

"I never understand why the Government allows itself to be rooked in all its contracts, when special officials, Civil Servants, I suppose, are employed solely for the purpose of assessing fair prices." Boffin was off again. "The repair bills on these boats of ours are incredible—£500 or £1,500 for quite small repairs, prices for which a civilian would expect to have the boat built."

"Tubby said something the other day that I had not thought about before," I observed. "He said that the whole trouble with the British Isles politically is the fact that we are not a self-supporting community. We have to import food and pay for it with foreign trade and assets. He said it was this that tied the hands of any Government, Conservative or Labour, whatever might be their real aims. The people who really ruled the country were the men who controlled the foreign assets. We've all heard of this power behind the Throne; the secret hand that seems to hold every Government, however well-intentioned it may be, powerless; that seems to direct the Cabinet so often against the wishes of the people; the sort of influence that produces a sinister lack of cordiality with Russia in high places and probably worked for co-operation with Hess and again with Darlan after the landing in North Africa.

"Well, Tubby's theory is that a group of capitalists, probably quite few in number, have such control of England's foreign assets, that they can say to the Government 'You do so-and-so, or——' The threat, of course, is to cut off these sources of income and trade abroad, which would mean that the country would head directly for financial disaster and the people would be threatened with starvation. The people would not understand the true cause, would blame the Government, and the latter would be discredited.

"Each Government in turn realizes that this money power has got them where it wants them, and has to give way. So that the real ruler of the country is big business."

"I'd never thought of that before," said Boffin. "What a bloody awful thought! The worst of it is there doesn't seem anything one can do about it."

"The only answers are, either to make the country self-supporting or have a sufficiently ruthless House of Commons to insist on the seizing and nationalizing of all these foreign assets that form the source of power," said Mallite; "and it might well not be possible to do either, however determined the Government was, since assets abroad are to a large extent governed by the law of the country in which they are situated."

"Which means that big business can hold the world up to ransom, until it's smashed in an international way. And that's a hell of a job in the present state of political development," I added.

"I'm sure there is something behind this big business racket; it must be at the root of a lot of trouble, it can't be all just wild rumours."

"The Captain has a theory that the war is directly attributable to the machinations of the big capitalist; that Hitler and his crowd are only tools, though admittedly tools that got out of hand. He thinks that big business saw its opportunity in down and out Germany; it lent money, set up arms industries, which caused other nations to arm, profits came pouring in.

"But Hitler, having tasted power, proved intransigent. He refused to obey orders. He became master; with his insatiable

lust for German supremacy war was inevitable. English and French big business saw their mistake too late. Their factories undefended by even a single gun, at the mercy of their tool's Luftwaffe. Even so we had to fight them. A miracle happened at Dunkirk and after. This enabled deluded European big business to persuade its elder brother in America that there was still hope, and that unless help was forthcoming the effects would be disastrous for American big business as well. Hence the Lease Lend plan, and America's gradual participation, ending inevitably in Pearl Harbour."

There was a pause.

"It's an interesting theory," I added, "and probably a lot of truth in it. Basically the economics brought about by big business, as at present conceived, are at the root of most of our trouble. By a somewhat different approach Peter Drucker pins the responsibility for Fascism on big business, or rather the failure of capitalist economy, in his book *The End of Economic Man*."

"Is it good?" interjected Cowley.

"One of those books that you know at once has hit the nail on the head," said David.

"The Captain thinks," I went on, "that the only hope for the world is if there are enough honest men in the British and American Governments after the war to insist on taking the oil, the armaments, the ships and all the things that make war possible, out of private hands."

"I believe he's right; and it is up to us and others like us to see that there are enough of these honest men. All we want is a lead and the right lead. The following would be terrific. People are tired of corruption in high places."

There was a long silence. Mallite's glass was replenished. Rodney, idly turning over the pages of a recent A.F.O. brought the conversation back to a lighter vein with a delighted chuckle:

"Have you seen this marvellous A.F.O. about confinement in a cell?"

"No," said Boffin, "read it out."

"Summary Punishment," began Rodney: "Confinement in a Cell (No. 10). It has been reported to their lordships that the

daily task of picking 2 lb. of oakum is insufficient now that tarred sisal, which is far easier to pick, is generally supplied instead of well-used tarred hemp.

(2) "In future, the daily task is to be the picking of either 2 lb. of tarred hemp, or 6 lb. of tarred sisal.

(3) "K.R. & A.I. Article 569, Clause *b*, is being amended."

"I like to think of their lordships gravely reviewing the position," said Rodney, and continued in a high clipped voice: "If you don't believe me, my dear Ponsonby, try picking 2 lb. of oakum yourself."

This sally at their lordships' expense was well received. I proceeded to relate a story I had heard that morning from a rather senior and very Scottish officer, with an excellent dry humour, who had been celebrating the acquisition of an extra half-stripe the night before, and who evidently detested his Chief of Staff:

"We had been enjoying ourselves to the full," he had said, "by burying the Chief of Staff in effigy and in fitting style with a candle at his feet. And," he added with a sly twinkle, "on the principle of dust to dust and ashes to ashes we buried him in the heads."

There was a gust of laughter and the tale was capped by Cowley.

"I heard a story the other day which should please those endeavouring to instruct the matelot," he said. "A petty officer was holding a general intelligence test for a class of newly joined ratings. He said: 'If you was to be standing out in the road and you was to notice the following happenings what would you think—first a doctor comes along and goes into the house; then a little later you notices a lawyer come along and he goes into the same house, and still you waits about and a bit later you sees a priest come along and go into that house. Now what would you think was going on?'" There was a fearful silence. Finally one rating spoke up, albeit hesitatingly: 'Might it be one of them places, by any chance in a manner of speaking?'"

At this, the party broke up in disorder and we repaired to lunch. One more happy hour had been spent, another link had been forged in the chain of our comradeship. Thus our com-

munal life developed, day by day, with hard work at times and periods of leisure, with discomfort and danger and little social gatherings. Thus we got to know each other as only the schoolboy knows his class mate; many personalities and eccentricities were disclosed, and many corners rubbed off. The character of the men I was to see much action with was revealed to me as much in this manner as in the sterner setting of our clashes with the enemy.

I have already described a few; others must now be briefly mentioned. Harpy Lloyd was by this time the recognized leader of the M.T.Bs. He alone had hung on from the early days of *Beehive*. He had learnt much about the R.N.V.R. and we had acquired a store of knowledge and information about the navy from him. Harpy was spare of frame, with fair hair and a red face; his movements were inclined to be sudden and unexpected and he had a curious jerky walk. It was his eyes, though, that impressed one most. Large and bright, in the setting of his somewhat rubicund countenance, they had the most piercing and penetrating effect, and on one occasion, to his great chagrin, having spotted the enemy at a great distance at night, there appeared in the paper a reproduction of the upper half of his face and the inscription "Harpy 'Cats Eyes' Lloyd." He always preferred the less complimentary but naval description, "a couple of poached eggs in a bucket of blood." Other notable features about Harpy were his very ready Irish wit and his habit of standing with his right hand across his breast tucked into the front of his monkey jacket. The latter acquired for him the soubriquet of "Napoleon," and the former made him one of the most amusing and welcome members of our mess.

Lieutenant Cambridge, R.N.V.R., Tubby in the base, was S.O. of another flotilla. Tubby, as his name implies, was not tall, but very broad with a magnificent paunch. His job was to lead a group of relatively fast boats to the doorstep of Hitler's harbours.

In conformity with his figure, Tubby had a broad and cheerful countenance, invariably surmounted by an excessively small and flat naval cap. The only other things that were small about him were his feet, which seemed tiny and surprisingly inadequate for the bulk above. But his heart was large, and that, combined with

his smiling face, went far towards the creation of the happy ship's company that *Beehive* enjoyed in the summer of 1942.

One other officer who entered our circle about this time must be mentioned, Lieutenant Perry, R.N.V.R., who came as our engineer officer. I had met him and liked him during the short time that I had been at the training base during the early days. Rather short and distinguished looking with greying hair and regular features, he was the most able and intelligent collaborator one could ask for in gunboats. He had been in the R.N. as a young man and had come out early, long before the war, bored with the life and browed off with his senior officers. This is no disparagement of the latter, since Perry was of the type who is constitutionally incapable of being polite to a senior officer without the greatest restraint. Large quantities of rings are to him like a red rag to a bull. This outlook, coupled with an exceptionally outspoken disposition, led to a tremendous scene on one occasion when an unwise and unwary senior R.N. officer addressed a somewhat alcohol-inflated Perry at a gin party in patronizing approbation of the work R.N.V.Rs. were doing at *Beehive*. He expressed surprise and gratification that R.N.V.Rs. should be able to put up such a good show on their own, without the all-necessary and directive influence of their professional brethren. His consternation can be imagined when Perry retorted that it was about time he did realize it, that we had no objection to the R.N. keeping the ships clean in peacetime, but that when it came to war the R.N.V.Rs. got on with the job. We all realized how untrue and unwarranted an attack it was, but we could not help being secretly delighted. We had all suffered such patronage at one time or another.

Though this characteristic of Perry's occasionally caused difficulties, he knew more of our boats than anyone, having demonstrated them in the United States before the war and having operated them since, and coupled with his knowledge was an active fertile mind, which produced many of the ideas that emanated from *Beehive* and did much towards the improvement and development of our craft.

We were on the eve of change. The new flotilla was forming up.

I was to have the fourth boat, and Head and I went away to take her over.

Before this occurred two brief encounters with the enemy were to provide their quota of interest and amusement.

While I was away getting my new boat, Boffin was in charge of the flotilla. One night he came across some enemy patrols on their coast, and was fortunate in being able to engage a small minesweeper on her own. He was in his new boat. It was the first time that our new armament had been in action, and ably supported by Bussy, Boffin, without damage to his unit, savaged that minesweeper until large pieces of her upper works fell off and she was a battered and smoking wreck. But the chief interest in this affray lay in an entirely different direction. As Boffin accelerated away leading the unit into action, the usual thing happened. The second boat, whose C.O. had not been in action before, dropped further and further behind, instead of opening wide and surging up on his leader at this critical moment as he should have done. Not so Bussy. He had learnt his lesson well and truly in the action off Ostend. Seeing the second boat dropping back, Bussy gave her the gun, and though third in the line, he roared past and joined up with the leader. To pass another boat in those circumstances takes a lot of nerve. I knew I need never worry again about Bussy not being on my tail. Close station-keeping at night is a matter of confidence—rather like riding a bicycle. Once acquired it is easy and the art never lost. Bussy had achieved this result in full measure.

The other incident took place a month later also on the enemy coast. I had just arrived back with my new boat. It was her first operation. We had been keeping watch on the enemy convoy route for some time hoping for contact. Presently we heard a faint murmur. We investigated, and after an astonishingly long run to the north, we found our quarry. I had a large party, six boats. Imagine our chagrin therefore when we discovered that it was only a little motor fishing vessel, trawling.

Their terror as we approached must have been pathetic. In the quiet summer night we must have sounded like the wrath of God. I stopped the unit and closed. I had David James with me, and

enquiring whether anyone aboard spoke German he replied that he could. As we came alongside, I told him to ask in German whether anyone spoke English. The reply came back in perfectly good English:

"We don't understand you."

I am glad to be able to report that this had no damping effect on David's opinion of his linguistic capabilities.

Though the contact was disappointing we acquired a large basket of excellent fresh fish, and the Captain much enjoyed his breakfast that morning.

NOTE.

A great deal of this chapter has had to be omitted for reasons of security. Hichens's flotilla had been selected for a special honour: to seek out and destroy a nest of E-boats operating from a certain port.

. . . WE SAILED AT DUSK. It was a clear, moonless night, with a gusty westerly wind. The boats tumbled and slid, surged and thumped fitfully. My mind flew back to that first operation of all. Much had happened since. Now we really had a quarry and a chance of getting him; a still better chance of dealing faithfully with him when we did. I compared the C.O., who rather desperately endeavoured to cling on to his leader on that dark and rainy night in February, with the S.O. who now led his well-found unit of four boats, selected to oppose and harry this bunch of E-boats which had done so much damage. There had been hard work, yes, but luck, too; how much luck only the seaman can realize. I had much to be thankful for. Had I changed with my changing fortunes? I supposed so. More confident. Less afraid, not so much of the enemy, as of senior officers. Sure of my control over men.

"Boat astern flashing, sir."

My signalman roused me from my somewhat complacent reflections. A boat was in trouble, a minor defect, but she must return. The box lamp flicked; the unit sped away south-east, leaving the lame boat limping home.

It was dark now, the sky frosty with stars, the sea an unending sequence of shapeless black lumps. Time passed. . . .

I sniffed the freshening westerly wind. A good three to four now and gusting to five. The lop had become a confused lump and surge. Guns were beginning to swing and bang.

"No good for E-boats to-night," I yelled across to Boffin; "the bastards won't like this."

"No," came the reply.

Silence reigned, save for the gentle breaking, splashing, thudding cacophony of a boat lifting and dipping in a confused sea. These waters were familiar to me of old; I might have been in my little boat, lying off waiting for daylight, as a boy. It was hard to realize it was war.

If nothing happened by two o'clock our orders allowed us to close the coast and seek out any enemy patrols or convoys.

As the second hour of the middle watch drew to a close I debated the point mentally. The wind was freshening. It was no proper weather for fast gunboats and there was very little likelihood of anything being about. Better to wait here until near dawn; then return to harbour. Yet something impelled me towards adventure that night. I entered the wheelhouse and plotted a course.

"Start up."

"Course south 15 east, coxswain."

"South 15 east, sir."

Muttering engines rose to a growl, steadied to a roar. The unit lurched and thudded southward. Speed was reduced, thereby cutting the unit's noise to a minimum.

"Light bearing green 65, sir," came the cry.

Yes, yes, but the bearing? I was craning round the compass.

"Starboard wheel. Steer south 50 west."

The unit steadied into the head sea, much less in here close under the enemy shore.

Action stations was sounded, tin hats donned. Staring through the glasses, standing on the canopy by the mast, I could just discern two dim hulls. At our twelve knots we were overhauling slowly.

The little lamp, carefully shaded from ahead, flicked out the

thrilling signal: "Enemy in sight." Signlessly, the unit fell into line ahead.

The wind was in our teeth, we might not be heard; we should not be seen until right upon them; we had effected surprise, the most important factor of all in this warfare.

They were large trawlers, clearly visible now, heading west at about 8 knots. I hung debating that inevitable question, when to make the signal for increasing speed. The danger of being heard, against the danger of being caught without one's speed.

With a fresh head wind the former was the lesser evil. The light flicked twice; the unit opened into an ominous growl; the spray parted wide with the speed increased. We were level now with the off-shore and rearmost vessel. She had seen us at last. She was challenging. I dared not wait longer, the next move might be a well-aimed 4-inch brick, and she could not miss at that range, less than a cable. Neither could we!

I pressed the fire buzzer.

The next few minutes provided a welter of impressions for me, beginning with a crescendo of noise and light, passing through tense anxiety and ending with stark fear such as I had never known before.

All our guns burst into life. With the gun muzzles a few feet from one's ear, the noise was terrific. Light from the muzzle flashes, and tracer, dazzling and bewildering, the effect most gratifying. That trawler, hard hit and surprised, scarcely returned the fire at all.

We were accelerating now, tending to turn in across her bows towards the other trawler, when I saw a small tanker ahead. In a flash the position was clear. The two trawlers were the stern escort of the tanker; there were almost certainly more escort vessels ahead. But here was our chance, the near escort subdued; the way in to the tanker open and exposed.

"We'll depth charge this bloody," I shouted to Curtis.

It was all he needed. He knew what was required of him. I lifted the throttles high as he headed in across her bows. The little boat leaped forward quivering with unleashed power, her guns projecting streams of brilliant light into the rapidly nearing hull.

Head was by me now.

"Stand by to let go port depth charge," I yelled.

The stream of shells hitting the enemy vessel, some penetrating, some bursting on the outside, lit up the outline of the ship as though she was one of Brock's famous firework images on the last night of Henley. In the vivid, scintillating glare her bow waves, pressed outward and upward at what must have been her maximum speed, caught my eye and held me transfixed.

I had been conning the coxswain on, at least so I thought; but in the uproar and confusion I doubt if he had heard or understood. Would we clear that upthrown white bow wave, that sharp straight bow? I thought not, but I could do no more. It was out of my control, Curtis had the wheel and I must leave it to him. I remembered anxiously how we had practised this very attack on a trawler. How control on that occasion too had slipped from me at the end. How Curtis had flipped the stern of my old boat right in under the overhanging bows. How the trawler's crew had run in astonishment to the side to watch, and had received our wash right over them and high up on the wheelhouse. How we had missed them by a bare two feet. How I went back to apologize and how stuffy they had been. Well there would be no going back to apologize this time!

In the event I think we cleared the enemy's bow by less than ten feet, after one of the most magnificent pieces of steering by Curtis that I have ever witnessed. But not before we had received a withering blast from the disengaged escort vessel just astern and to port of the tanker, and from the latter herself now almost overhanging us.

You could feel the boat shudder at the shower of blows; shrapnel flew whining in all directions; a dazzling blaze of fire burst forth at my very feet in the wheelhouse.

We had got there. Head had pulled the depth charge release at the exact moment, and a few seconds later the boat shook to the underwater explosion. It had been a model attack. Just one of those rare occasions when everything goes right. And rare indeed they are!

It was at that moment that I knew real fear. The wheelhouse

was a blaze of brilliant light. It seemed that we must be irretrievably afire. It was obvious that the entire upper deck crew had been knocked out by that infernal blast. Something had to be done about it at once.

My sensations at that moment are still vivid. I was stricken with fear, real fear. I remember thinking desperately "I shall never get back, I shall never see Catherine or the children again." I fancy I was near to panic; but fortunately the fear of panic had a stimulating effect. I was galvanized into activity, the activity that was required.

I stepped down into the wheelhouse and set about me. Head quickly followed. Stamping and striking, we subdued the flames, made more vivid by flares lit from the exploding ammunition.

When darkness reigned again in the wheelhouse, fire could be seen down the passage in the magazine.

We crammed down the passage way and jumped on the flames. Barnes, though wounded, dropped down from the gun above and helped. We worked in silence amidst the deep-throated bellow of the engines, opened wide. In a few desperate minutes we had the situation in hand.

I struggled back into the dustbin, to regain control of the situation after a five-minute interlude. The sight was dramatic enough. The throttles were hard up; with the boat light of fuel, she was travelling at full speed. The cascading plume, which normally hangs some feet astern, was gone; at this speed she was right up, leaving a clean straight wake, hard as a board. The attack had taken place less than two miles from the shore. Curtis, cool as ever in action, after slamming the throttles hard up, had swept her away to seaward in a large curve ahead of the astonished forward escort; we were now tearing away from the scene of action. Through glasses the position was clear. The tanker was stopped and on fire. She was covered in a cloud of smoke, some from the fire, no doubt, but certainly most of it laid to hide her. Occasionally bright starshells burst to the northward, and in their light I could pick out some fast small craft, moving round the stationary glow, leaving a highflung trail of smoke.

We were many miles clear now. We stopped, called up the

others and asked if they were all right. On getting satisfactory replies a rendezvous to the north was proposed.

My boat was badly knocked about. Almost the only part of her that had escaped was the engineroom. We had no guns left capable of firing. Again half the crew were casualties, one dead and two of them very badly wounded. I had lost the equivalent of my whole crew in two successive actions within three months. Yet such is the British sailor, the more you grapple with the enemy, the more he likes you. It was truly spoken by Sir John Jervis when he said :

"The men are not yet created who can stand against the British seamen when properly disciplined and led."

How should this be otherwise when the more they fight the more they want to fight? Their appetite grows with what it feeds on.

At reduced speed, in a bumpy sea, we plodded home. Again the morphia was produced from my pocket and made to perform its merciful service. Again the decks were slippery with blood and cluttered with shell cases. Edwards was among the wounded. He was lying in the wheelhouse now, smoking a cigarette. For once he was not sucking his teeth, either humorously or with a grievance; he was obviously cheerful. Too obviously. I realized it must be serious. I fear he will never handle his gun at sea again. A steadier and more accurate shot has not come my way.

The Lewis gunner, a quiet, effective worker, greatly liked in the crew, was terribly wounded in the head, throat and stomach; obviously dying. As I knelt by him, seeing if there was anything more we could do, I realized he was conscious. I thought of my first introduction to motor racing. The fierce glare and heat of a continental day in June; the dry dusty sunbaked tarmac; the rise and fall, the whine and snarl of the highly tuned super-charged engines; four cars tight-bunched dicing for a lead. The blue one in front touching a bank, slamming madly across the road, hurtling into the hedge at over 100 m.p.h., leaving the driver unhurt, lying across the track. The second car, low and white, driven by an Englishman, turned deliberately aside to avoid that

body, disappearing through the hedge into a field. The third, also low and white, driven by a Frenchman, screaming across the prostrate form. The fourth, a red car, mine, flagged just in time to stop short of the red shambles. The rapid clearance, glimpses of the slow-moving ambulance as the cars raced past. That was all.

The Englishman, who had driven off the road in a vain attempt to save the leader, had shot out of his car, removing the lower part of his stomach and testicles in the process. He had got up, walked round the car remarking how little it was damaged, apparently in no discomfort. Suddenly the pain began to come. He collapsed in a dead faint and died soon after. Thus is nature merciful to her badly injured sons. It was a comfort to remember in circumstances such as these.

Dawn found us fifteen miles off-shore.

Suddenly I was back to my childhood. I was a small leggy boy of seven, in a little sailing boat, barely capable of making to windward against a 1 knot tide. I was off the towering cliffs to seaward of St. Anthony, sailing daringly (though I did not know it), to the eastward with a soldiers' wind; running up the Cornish coast filled with the spirit of adventure, the blood of my ancestors (likely enough wreckers on occasion, as so many were in that out-lying county), throbbing with this taste of freedom and responsibility; that curious combination of emotions apparently so opposed yet inevitably inseparable for those who go down to the sea in ships.

It was the day I took possession of my first sailing boat, a little twelve-foot open boat with a lug sail and no centre board. Her name was *Arethusa*. He who understands these things will realize that she was not the boat to beat back against a head wind and sea. But the gods who decide these matters were evidently of the opinion that this was not the moment to settle the fate of this ignorant and youthful mariner. He was to be reserved for further execution upon their turbulent domain. The wind backed fast, and freshening from the south-east, gave me a soldiers' wind back again.

Here I was, still in essentials the same leggy boy, still in a small boat in a long sea: truly the boy is father of the man. I was still

revelling in it; my blood had not lost its zest for the sea. No matter that it was a high-speed motor boat now, instead of 4 knots and a 12-ft. dinghy. Was I not nearly six feet instead of four and a half?

We slid up harbour, the town still sleeping, and made fast to the pontoon to land our dead and wounded. All was still and peaceful, the ships reflected in the tranquil water, smoke rising straight in the quiet air. With the coming of day the wind had dropped. The harbour looked exactly as I have seen it so often of a fine summer's morning, soft toned delicate greys and blues; only the bodies, wrapped in blankets, lifted on stretchers, seemed incongruous.

Prominent amongst our friends ashore was the coastal force base doctor, Bob Swan, a Canadian, who thus early was called upon to show his worth. And what a showing he made. He was tireless in his efforts on our behalf. He concerned himself not only with the wounded, but with the active sea-going personnel. He studied our problems and produced valuable suggestions. Nothing was too much trouble for him. He noticed that we came in with red, sore eyes after a rough night, and produced eye shields and eye lotions. He saw that several of the men and one officer were beginning to suffer from a bout of hay fever, and he produced the necessary preventative before they were fully aware of their trouble. He saw that we were working night after night, and produced benzadrine and vitamin pills. At one time I went out on ten successive nights, and at another, eight nights running. There were occasions when I was considerably exhausted, but I was determined to deal faithfully with the E-boats and I knew that opportunities for rest would come when the weather broke. Swan's concern on my behalf, however, was often quite embarrassing. He would shake his head over me and utter the direst warnings if I continued. I was not used to such attention. Tall and rather thin, with a pale face, he did not look strong himself. Whether that was so or not, he did not spare himself, and the whole flotilla appreciated his efforts greatly. Aside from his professional activities he was the pleasantest of companions, and did much to make our life easier and more amusing.

Two days after this action, we were called out and ordered to sweep down the line of the convoy route. We were to look out for signs of wreckage.

It was a fine quiet day. The boats were spread three miles apart, thus covering a wide searching lane. We swept out at high speed, passing through a fishing fleet, who stared at us in considerable surprise, and on occasion made rude gestures as we came too close to their trawl, or when our wash slapped spray over their gunwale. The satellite cloud of gulls, wheeling and swooping in a continual kaleidoscope above each boat, intent on their pilfering, paid no attention to us.

Soon the fleet were little black dots on the skyline, then hull down. The English coast was out of sight. Suddenly George Duncan turned to starboard flashing, then slowed. We raced over and cut.

Out of the quietly, undulating surface of the sea they were lifting a body. It was clad in R.N.V.R. uniform, and looked unpleasantly limp. Presently George shouted the news. He was alive, and not too bad. His ship had been bombed the previous evening, and had sunk instantly. He fancied he was the only survivor.

I looked at my watch. It was 3.30 p.m. He had been in the water alone, hanging on to a small piece of timber for nearly twenty hours.

I told George to take him back at speed, sent a signal and continued the search.

The sea was glassy now. On this hot July day it looked inviting. But what deception! How cruel and merciless the reality! How lonely that boy must have been through the long dark hours. Cold, helpless, all but hopeless. Almost worse though when light came. No sign of land, no indication of help. Little likelihood of it.

To be left to the sea is a bitter fate. Such were my thoughts.

"I bet he was pleased to see us come along," was all I said. Head agreed.

We found odd bits of wreckage but nothing more. On our way back we passed some trawlers who requested us to close and take a half-drowned man back, as we could save much time.

We did so, only to find, after working on him for the rest of the

passage, that he was drowned. We thought he was another from the bombed ship, but found out afterwards that he had been carried off one of the trawlers by a towing wire flipping across the ship's stern.

We had been lucky again in being able to achieve our objective successfully, for the second time within three days. We made a good start and, which is more unusual, we were able to keep it up.

But we had to work for our success; night after night; only a pause if the weather broke. We did nineteen operations in under six weeks. Tiring maybe, but worth it. In the end we achieved our object, and had some nights of unfortgettable beauty as well.

On three occasions during the moonlight period we were called out suddenly on the strength of suspected E-boat reports. Nothing resulted. Possibly the reports were erroneous; possibly the elusive enemy returned, being now well aware that he was being pursued, and knowing from coastal reports that we were in wait for him.

Though uneventful, those passages will live in our memory. The loud rap on the door breaking through the heavy first sleep of physical exhaustion. The huddle of dressing, strange garments caricaturing the human shape. The mental effort to throw off the film of sleep, achieved only with the first deep breaths of the clear cool night air.

The stealthy tumult aboard. Engineroom crews running aft, hatches slamming, gun covers ripping off, orders shouted, muttered curses, all instantly drowned by the full-throated bellow of the first started engine. Thereafter concentrated noise, broken only by the momentarily louder coughing bang of yet another set of cylinders bursting into brazen-lunged life. The whole swelling into a cacophony of sound reverberating between the towering heights on either bank.

The comparative quiet as the boats slipped into line ahead, a signal lamp blinking, the engine-revs. dropped and steadied by the lead; only to give place again shortly to a still more thunderous cadence, tempered by the roar of wind past the ears, as the boats lifted to their speed and settled to a steady speed.

Those were the nights for beauty. The brilliant disc of a full

moon high in the heavens, the gently heaving surface of the sea throwing back its light in innumerable glinting facets. Few of us will forget these swift night passages and few, I fancy, were totally unaffected by the splendour of the scene.

The boats themselves seemed to show at their best in such a setting, like a beautiful woman knowing that she wears a becoming dress. The scars of battle, the imperfections of paint-work, the smudges of oil, all the little blemishes inseparable from a fighting ship engaged in her never-ending struggle, were lost in the all-embracing half tones. Only the grace and exhilarating strength of the swift moving hulls were apparent. The eager up thrust of the bows, the sweeping run lost to sight aft behind the sharp rising pressure wave, the far flung arc of spray flying back from beneath the forefoot, the steady rising plume up driven from the thrusting propellers gleaming white and transparent in the moonlight, like some enormous fountain in a fairy story of giantland, the impermeable yet never ending tracery of the interlacing wash, the sharp points and glints of light from the black gun barrels.

We spoke little at such times. The scene was all absorbing.

I remember on one occasion being close to the enemy coast on a night of flat calm, with a full moon in a clear sky. It seemed incredible that the enemy should be unaware of our presence, that they should not see us sitting quietly on the moving stream of water like giant sea birds, wings folded, head tucked at rest.

As if voicing my thoughts, a scrap of conversation from the engineroom hatch floated forward:

"Can't think why they don't see us," the voice was deep and quiet.

"Probably thinks we're bloody great seagulls, if they thinks anything at all," came the response in broad Cockney.

"They'd go for us hammer and bloody tongs if they was to know who it was."

The voice drifted away.

For some reason or other my mind went back to my childhood days. Carefree days, school and university holidays, my motor bike and little boat. How I had delighted in her. Choosing the

very limit of weather, exhilarated by the danger and struggle, until the fishermen shook their heads, and said that I was not long for this world. But here I was; what would they think now if they knew? They would be pleased, I fancied, and wish us well.

My reverie deepened. Searching back into those early days, I wondered why I had needlessly sought discomfort and danger in that little boat. It was clear to me that I had been groping unknowingly towards a philosophy that was now deeply-embedded. Security, life without risk; it was all wrong. In seeking for these humanity was following a false god. Life was inherently insecure. Why fight the inevitable? Why not out face it and dare the worst? That was at bottom the philosophy that I had developed, through lonely days in small boats, and later at the wheel of a racing car. The advantages had soon become apparent. Living an ordinary secure life ashore in peacetime, I had found that small things often loomed large, out of proportion. Little annoyances assumed the aspect of real grievances, fleeting, unworthy pleasures ranked high with the real treasures of life. True values were getting mixed. I may have been specially prone to this; certain it is that I often found myself in a rage over a minor inconvenience, or unduly cast down because I had been deprived of some trifling amusement. I had found that the most decisive way to clear the head, to regain proper values and humility, was to experience a real whiff of danger. Some may use religion, some music, others drink; for me danger. It is unforgettably effective. To feel real, instant fear of death; to contemplate the infinite, not from the security of a comfortable arm-chair, but as something imminent, pressing, that may engulf you now or before tomorrow's sun has set. That gives you to think. Values sort themselves as if by magic. Petty anger, pride, worthless ambitions take a nasty knock.

Instead of returning home and finding fault you realize how wonderful it is to have a home at all.

That this point of view, the necessity for living dangerously, is fairly generally appreciated, is shown by the popularity of dangerous sports. Sailing, hunting, big game shooting, motor-racing, all bear witness to this philosophy. Each can be made dangerous,

and in my opinion the value of a sport can be measured in direct ratio to the danger involved.

A sudden swing of the boat brought my mind back to the present. It was easy to practise my philosophy these days. I recalled how Gotelee, borrowing my old brakeless bike, had delivered himself of the remark:

"I presume it is part of your policy of living dangerously, that your bike has no brakes. I just now nearly killed myself."

Good old Goaters! Life was never dull with him around. But it wasn't often dull anyway! Under the stressès imposed by leading a gunboat flotilla I found myself more and more often soothing my irritability and ignoring my discomforts with the remark:

"Why worry? It's a bloody sight better than being face downward in the North Sea!"

Our chance to have another bang at the enemy came suddenly and unexpectedly. On the night of the 1st-2nd August we were on our way to a patrol position. As was our custom we left base at dusk, shot our guns off, and headed away to the south-east. As dark closed down we ran into a thick belt of fog. Speed was reduced, shaded stern lights switched on, but still it was difficult enough, impossible to see a boat further than fifty to sixty yards. Altogether it was a sufficiently unpromising start; I seriously contemplated returning on account of the weather. Finally deciding to give it a bit longer, I was suddenly electrified to receive a report of E-boats proceeding towards the English coast. This was more like it!

We altered course at once, to intercept.

The reports continued to pour in. Then suddenly the E-boats turned back.

They had met the fog, I supposed, and given up their project. There was only one thing to do, go like hell: The box lamp flickered twice.

"I'm going up to flat out speed, Head." This to the first lieutenant.

The thunder of the engines redoubled; the boat trembled and lifted, the pressure wave and plume aft first rose then sank as the hull, thrust forward, raised by the upward drive of the propellers,

• touched the water on the surface only and left a flat clean planing wake.

I looked anxiously astern. This would prove a testing time. The fog was still thick, though with occasional patches of light mist giving promise of better conditions to come. This would show whether the flotilla training had sunk in. Full speed in these conditions was asking a lot. I thanked the Lord for the composition of the unit. Boffin and George Duncan were the best I had, always thirty yards on the quarter as though tied together by string. Ladner was more problematical. He had not been with us long. He did magnificently. All four boats raced to the eastward in a snarling, thundering wedge, uplifting to the spirit. Here was justification for the continuous efforts made to keep our band of officers together. Only by continuous practice as a flotilla, and with full confidence in each other, could we manage such a speed in such conditions. The flotilla spirit, the feeling of comradeship in difficult and dangerous achievement was never more keenly felt.

I looked at the chart. The E-boats had little more than twenty miles to go before they were in harbour, we had more than sixty. Here also was justification for the decision to adhere to the fast boat. At all events on this occasion speed was the essence of the situation. Could we do it? There was just a chance. The E-boats would not be hurrying, they would do the last few miles as they closed the harbour entrance at quite slow speed. With a little luck we might make it. It was worth trying. •

I looked up from my anxious scrutiny of the rev. counters and peered into the all-pervading fog. It was still bad, but definitely tending to thin. At that pace, and in those conditions of very low visibility, the boats gave an incredible impression of surging speed. With the particles of fog skimming past the eyes at short focus, nothing visible beyond the fast flying spray thrown from alongside, the impression of speed was irresistible.

Looking astern I saw one of the stokers appear from below, and gaze out from the after magazine hatch. After a moment's contemplation he turned to the re-load number and yelled:

“The old man's in a bloody awful hurry to-night.”

He had estimated my sentiments precisely!

• Time passed, the E-boats reports ceased, the fog dispersed, the night became clear and still, only the thrust of the propellers, the roar of the engines, the rush of cool air past the face, continued steadily, remorselessly.

• Would we get there in time? I was reminded irresistibly of that first chase at 18 knots. The same insistent query. But this time the flotilla was revelling in its full power and speed. Tin hats were substituted for the normal miscellaneous head-gear of the tea-cosy variety, the men were at their action stations, rigid and tense mentally, but swaying and giving physically to the peculiar dancing motion of the hulls as they stepped lightly from one gentle acclivity to another on the seemingly smooth yet eternally restless surface of the sea.

We raced to our chosen position, and slumped instantly to immobility and silence.

As the roar of our engines subsided, a subdued rumble, like the residue of a long drawn out and slowly dying thunder clap, became audible from the direction of the harbour. They had beaten us to it. They were just entering. After all that effort we were too late. Missed them by five minutes. How we cursed!

That was no good, though relieving to pent-up exasperation; the elusive bastards! I studied the plot. There definitely had been two distinct groups out according to the reports. Perhaps only one had got back so far. The last signals showed the later group returning further to the westward. If they had not got in yet, and from the times of the reports there was just a chance that this might be so, had they returned slowly, they would be coming along the coast and might arrive at any moment.

We listened intently, eagerly, with a growing sense of frustration as the seconds slipped by. A few minutes passed thus.

I was beginning to despair.

"Do you hear anything to the south-west?"

This from Boffin across the narrow space of smooth water that separated us.

There seemed to be just the faintest rhythmical murmur. Dead silence, all attention strained in the same direction. The

murmur became a regular thud, thud, muffled but recognizable.

"Start up."

"Course South 15 east."

There was no time to lose. Swift action must follow instant decision if we were to get them before they were in. They could not be more than two miles at the most from their harbour, but they would be going very slowly now.

Never has the unit got off and formed into line ahead more swiftly and eagerly. We were about to give the E-boats the surprise of their young, but far from innocent, lives. Most of the gunboats personnel realized this and there was anticipation and relish in their every movement as they went to action stations again. This time with the sure knowledge of a fight.

A scrap of conversation floated up from the port Lewis gunner as he tested the fit of his pans and cocked his guns:

"Obr. Bet they'll be surprised, getting something else with their tea and sausage."

And they got it! As we closed rapidly the dark line of the breakwater showed black and menacing, now less than a mile away. A half mile to the south-east the hull of a motionless ship became apparent, lying stopped, or at anchor, just off the breakwater. Drawing nearer, her outline could be recognized. She was a German torpedo-boat, about 600 tons, like a small destroyer. What an opportunity if only we carried a torpedo! Stopped, unsuspecting, had she seen us she would merely have waved a friendly hand knowing that numerous E-boats were entering harbour. How I longed to detach the last of my line of four boats, ordering her to torpedo that ship and then rejoin!

But the E-boats were our quarry. We held on, disregarding that silent shape.

There they were at last. The low unrelieved silhouette. Four of them in line ahead, barely moving. Awaiting permission to enter as like as not. I felt a great surge of triumph at that moment. We had got them at last. It had been hard work, night after night, difficult, trying work. But they were momentarily at our mercy now; we had effected the best possible form of surprise;

we licked our lips, mentally reversing the old blasphemous use of the grace in the days of close-fought broadsides.

"For what they are about to receive. . ."

Altering course slightly to starboard we moved under the stern of the last in the line. We opened fire, pouring a hail of death into that aftermost boat at a range of one hundred yards. She lit up aft with a bright flash. Each one received the same treatment as we turned slowly up the line. I heard an excited shout from the port Lewis gunner: "Cor, look at them jumping over the side."

Indeed the consternation in that unit of E-boats must have been wellnigh complete. At all events the fire they succeeded in returning was negligible. The gun crews were probably mostly killed trying to close up, and very likely many of the guns were already unloaded. For was not the breakwater entrance a bare mile away? We continued to circle the now motionless E-boats, raking them with fire. Their consternation was probably equalled by the amazement ashore and in the neighbouring torpedo boats. They could not think what was going on. It must have seemed to them that the E-boats had suddenly gone mad. The torpedo-boats began to approach, the shore batteries to put up tentative star shell, but still after eight minutes of slaughter we held the field almost unmolested.

Then they realized what was happening and one of the finest displays of pyrotechnics that I have ever seen was unloosed. Shore batteries put up innumerable star shell, 4-inch shells from the torpedo-boats and other batteries began to sing by, bursting with brilliant effect. The sight was unforgettable. Pale yellow-green luminosity from the slowly dropping shower of star shells, fierce red, green and yellow streaks of tracer interlacing in fantastic patterns, vivid splodges of light where the big shells were bursting; roar of engines, crash and stutter of guns; the almost silent, motionless line of E-boats, glittering white in the artificial radiance, seemingly strangely helpless in their immobility; the dark line of the breakwater spitting bright flashes of flame irregularly, viciously, up and down the line, like a crazed xylophonist striking his keys wantonly and at random; the cautiously

approaching towering hulls of two torpedo-boats lit brightly by the occasional bursts of shells on their sides, still obviously puzzled, but the flashes from their guns gaining in momentum as they closed; the line of gunboats, weaving and storming round their quarry, still magnificently together in tight line ahead formation, the spray thrown back reflecting the green effulgence of the star shells in a luminous halo round the hulls.

It was no time for losing oneself in the wild beauty of the scene. Though the fire from the enemy's big guns was mercifully inaccurate, there was so much of it by this time that the gunboats were beginning to be hit. It would only be necessary to stop one properly in such a situation to lose the boat. We had had twelve minutes of concentrated fire, we had wrought our destruction, more and more of our guns were falling silent with stoppages as the pace of the action began to tell. It was time to get out.

Passing swiftly between the line of E-boats and the now adjacent but still startled torpedo-boats, delivering the latter a final burst at point blank range, I led away into the welcoming darkness to seaward.

Throttles were lifted. We were gone as suddenly as we had come. It was a full ten minutes before the enemy appreciated our absence. To our unbounded delight the battle still raged behind us; the unfortunate E-boats, unmercifully pounded from the shore, stung to a belated and mistaken retaliation, aided by the torpedo-boats, fired back at the breakwater. Thus the ball was kept rolling.

Four miles to seaward, well clear of the star shell, we stopped to count the cost and enjoy the fun.

The cost was surprisingly light, almost always the case when complete tactical surprise is effected. Two minor casualties, a few holes in the boats, two boats leaking forward, nothing serious.

The battle died down, the light died out of the sky; as darkness settled in, Boffin shouted:

"What's that glow?"

Glasses were raised long and searchingly. Then as the distant glow broke out and brightened, it was obvious. A cheer went up. There were two of them alight. You could see the separate

blazes, about a cable apart, bright pillars of fire. Nothing could control them. Two done for and the other two badly spoilt—no doubt about that!

Speeding home in the slow spreading light, thoughts wandered happily over the event of the night, happily because this time there were no limp, sagging, disfigured bodies aboard the gunboats; happily because we had done our duty in seeking out and engaging the enemy closely under the very shadow of his shore batteries, secure in the knowledge that this would anger him greatly.

I reviewed the swift chase, the stealthy approach, the sudden onslaught. How different from the days of old! I recalled how Nelson had described the start of a fight with a Spanish frigate. He had hailed the Spaniard:

"This is an English frigate." And demanded her surrender or he would fire. And the "noble" reply—Nelson's own word—that delighted him so:

"This is a Spanish frigate, and you may begin as soon as you please."

How different this exchange from our recent gangster tactics! Certainly the amenities of war had deteriorated!

We had anticipated correctly; the enemy were very angry. That night the German wireless announced "nine British boats attacked our forces. Five were destroyed."

The greater the lie, the more the vexation!

The fine weather continued. My recollections of this period are of night after night at sea, the slowly losing battle in the effort to make up sleep by day, of bathes in the turgid waters of the river with my children, of lessening friction in the base, greater freedom and understanding as the original inhabitants got used to the young, lively, and somewhat unruly visitors.

I remember one day, shortly after the action last described, going to discuss tactics with the S.O.O. For some reason I had to wait in the C.-in-C's. secretary's office. I was idly turning over the pages of a 1938 edition of *Jane's Fighting Ships*.

Suddenly my attention was riveted. There before my incredulous eyes was an admirable photo of an E-boat, exactly in every detail like the one we had captured the year before. The raised fore deck, the bridge, the four torpedoes, two of them re-loads, the let-in torpedo tubes, the large after compass, the lowside rails, the smoke apparatus. I collected my scattered wits and read the paragraph beneath.

It was the advertisement of a German ship-building yard, proclaiming their wares and inviting all and sundry to come and buy! Here was the world's fastest Diesel driven torpedo boat—36½ knots! Exactly the speed we had arrived at after comparing notes with all who had taken part in E-boat hunts!

The whole thing seemed too fantastic. The reiterated instructions to bring one back alive at all costs; the intense interest in all the details we could guess at or find out; the continual bombardment of questions on every point, even as to whether the engines were Diesels, carried on for weeks over Admiralty telephone lines; the tremendous discussions and controversies as to maximum speeds.

And here it all was laid out for us in *Jane's*. Come see, come buy!

The Admiralty could have bought as many E-boats as they wished, and indeed were pressed to do so, but one short year before the outbreak of war.

Well, well! Talk about visiting the sins of the fathers' upon the children! The sins of our elders' omissions certainly pressed heavily upon the fighting young. I wondered gloomily whether anybody had been sacked or even censured for not taking the most elementary interest in the preparation of our country for war in the sphere of the fast surface craft. I supposed not. The do-nothing brigade was well entrenched ashore, and were only now being converted to the next best thing, doing as little as possible!

In the midst of our night patrols we were suddenly called upon to do a job by day. I remember that we were all sitting in

the wardroom. It was mid-day, gin time, and Kelly had just performed prodigies with the bottles. We were all dead tired. I had slumped into a half recumbent posture on the wardroom settee and shut my eyes:

"What will you have, sir?"

"Oh; anything or everything, Kelly," I replied, without looking up.

Kelly took me at my word. He picked up a gin bottle in one hand, a rum bottle in the other, and poured in a liberal dose simultaneously. Then he picked up lemon squash and orange squash and applied them also together, finishing off with water.

Thus was born the flotilla's famous Mark VIII. I can recommend it as a delicious drink and a remarkable reviver.

Conversation became general when the drinks had got round. Boffin began to tell us about his coxswain, an active service petty officer called Hartland.

"He's a terrific fire-eater. Gets quite browned off if he's not going to sea all the time."

"He looks tough," I said. "I gather he needs a fight at least once a fortnight to satisfy his pugnacious instincts."

"Yes, and he keeps his crew on the hop," said Boffin. "He was bloody funny the other day. We were crossing the street when a lot of cyclists came out of a factory. Old Hartland was carrying some gear and slouching along, you know the way he does, looking like a great gorilla. The first cyclist avoided us, but the next one came straight on, and we had to jump a bit to get out of his way. Hartland just looked over his shoulder and shouted: 'It's all right mate, I've dodged a bloody sight worse than you before now.' Everybody heard it, all the women shopping. It was perfect."

"Elder statesmen have nothing on the active service rating in the way of repartee," said Kelly,

Conversation languished. We were so tired that the intellectual level deteriorated rapidly, and the repetition of easily remembered stories proved easier than original discussion.

"Have you heard the latest joke circulating in Coastal Forces,

about why trying to get something out of the Admiralty is like making love to an elephant?" I said.

David shook his head.

"Because the pleasure is negligible, the danger of being squashed is enormous, and anyway you see no results for nine years!"

This was well received, and David took up the tale.

"Have you heard the one about the very senior pongo officer choosing a secretary?"

There was a general negative; interest quickened slightly. Stories at the expense of the Army were somehow inevitably popular.

"Well, a very senior pongo staff officer was choosing his personal secretary. A psychologist was present to help in the selection. He explained that by asking each girl a very simple question he would be able to throw much light on their intellect and abilities.

"The first girl came in. He asked her:

"What are two and two?"

"Four," said the girl.

"Thank you very much," said the psychologist.

"The second girl was asked the same question.

"They are four if you add them; twenty-two if you put them side by side," she replied.

"The psychologist thanked her, called in the third girl, and asked her also:

"What are two and two?"

"Four if you add them, twenty-two if you put them side by side, and nothing if you subtract them."

"Thank you very much," said the psychologist, and when she had gone out, he turned to the very senior officer and said:

"There you are, sir. You see by asking that very simple question we have thrown considerable light on these young ladies' abilities. Now, which will you have?"

"There was a pause while the very senior officer cleared his throat:

"Ha, hem. The one with the big bust."

There was a shout of delight at this, and there is no knowing to what depths the conversation might not have dropped, had not there been a sudden disturbance.

A somewhat dishevelled matelot shoved his head into the wardroom, removing his cap, and said:

"Lootenant Commander 'Itchens wanted on the telephone."

Regretfully I drained my Mark VIII and climbed wearily and laboriously to the upper deck of the base ship, where the instrument was situated.

The voice came through distinct and impersonal:

"There's an airman in the water in position . . . All available gunboats to search the area forthwith."

I found myself saying: "But we've just come in from sea," and swallowed the remark as unworthy and irrelevant.

"I'll take all the boats that are fuelled. Will you give me that position again?"

As I wrote down the latitude and longitude, my mind dwelt on the air factor. It would take us to within twenty miles of the enemy coast; the day was brilliant, clear and cloudless; the gentle wind would be wafting the roar of our engines towards the enemy coast, which had an unpleasant reputation for fast, efficient, striking forces, especially the recent Focke-Wulf 190.

"Will there be air cover, sir?" I asked.

"Yes, full cover will be laid on. I'll see to that," came the reply.

Thus reassured, I returned to the boats. Within seven minutes of the news breaking, they were letting go and dropping down the harbour. Thrashing to sea, gathering speed in a tight wedge, three boats sped out and steadied on their course.

The land was still on the starboard quarter when the Spitfires arrived, zooming, circling, diving, weaving like friendly seagulls following a trawler cleaning her catch.

This was a bit of all right! We were not used to such assiduous attention. Generally we had to fend for ourselves. Still, this was entirely an air force affair and we took it as our due, nevertheless highly gratified.

The run to the position passed quickly enough, beguiled for me by the highly diverting and persistent efforts of George Duncan to get one of his Lewis guns to fire properly, whistles blowing, the whip crack of .303, silence, more whistles and orders, until the wretched little brute finally saw reason and fired in an unrelenting stream.

Boats spread four miles apart for the search. We scanned the smiling, sunny, wind-caressed face of the sea, seemingly so benevolent to our eyes, accustomed to her darkened countenance of dusk, night and grey dawn, finding it hard to realize that a fellow human was near at hand in dire distress.

Suddenly one of our boats altered course slightly to port and began to slow. We raced over to her as she lay stopped, strong arms helping a man from a yellow rubber dinghy alongside. The aircraft circled twice, dipped low in salute, and sped away to the north. The blue vault of the sky was totally empty. Sky met sea all round in varying shades of blue, nothing to be seen save the three little boats in a cluster, small dark specks in that dazzling void of sun-drenched gently heaving water.

The airman was a Czech. He was slightly hurt and could speak little enough English. We gathered that he thought there might be another airman down in the vicinity, the man he had been looking for. There had been another position given, a little to the east and north. I decided to search through it, and then return home.

As the minutes went by in our solitude, eyes began to turn apprehensively to the enemy coast little more than fifteen miles away. In such glorious summer weather it seemed absurd to do anything but lie on the decks sunbathing; yet the gunners sat rigid in their turrets, scanning the sky for the tiny death-dealing dots that would hurl themselves down sun at over two hundred miles an hour.

Nothing happened until nearly two hours later, as we lifted the land on the skyline, a snarling, swerving batch of fighters tore down on us and resumed their concentrated and now totally unnecessary attentions. Either because it was tea-time, or for

some more subtle reason, we had been without escort throughout the most dangerous period of our trip. Still, we had not been attacked and it had been a lovely day!

My boat came back after a "refit" renewed in body and soul by her creators. The day after her return, we sailed in the early hours of the morning and looked for trouble. We found it in the shape of four patrol trawlers. We surprised them and shot one up severely. Then we tackled the others. Fully roused, their fire became more accurate. Hits on our boats would be fatal, engines damaged or tanks ignited and the ship was lost; our fire could have little more than severe nuisance value on a trawler, inflicting some damage, killing personnel, necessitating patches in plates; nothing more, unless we were exceptionally lucky and set one on fire, a very unlikely occurrence.

We were not to throw our valuable and specialized boats away on trawlers. We disengaged; but not before Bussy Carr had received an all but fatal wound. A .303 bullet passed right through him, puncturing his lungs.

We sped home. Knowing that his life hung on a matter of minutes, our anger can be imagined when we ran into thick fog thirty miles from the English coast. Speed was maintained. Visibility two hundred yards, still at full speed the range coming down.

"One thousand yards."

"Five hundred yards."

The situation was tense.

"Three hundred yards."

I began to ease.

"Two hundred yards."

As we slowed to a crawl the land appeared through the fog. We had missed the entrance. But not by much. I recognized some outlying land marks. We were two miles to the eastward of the opening. Creeping along the shore, we felt our way in, and Bussy was in hospital little more than thirty minutes late on normal conditions. He received expert attention at once, was

operated on and nursed back from the very threshold of death. Time, I understand, had been the crucial factor.

My new boat had been to sea three times. On each occasion she had made contact with the enemy, even though the first encounter had resulted in nothing more exciting than the transfer of fish. We were much impressed and considered that she must be a ship of destiny.

Our last promising trip was also a sweep, this time with a boat from another flotilla. And what a noise that boat made! There seemed to be a specially vibrant quality in her deep-throated roar. Certain it is we could pick her out above and distinct from other boats at great distances. "The Hammers of Hell" we called her. She lived fully up to her reputation this time.

We swept along the enemy coast a respectful ten miles, in the hopes of avoiding detection. Not a bit of it. The night was quiet. With the "Hammers of Hell" going full bore, star shell and flares were going up all along the thoroughly alarmed enemy coast.

Half way through our sweep we were startled by reports of E-boats. They were moving south. Plotting the reports eagerly, it soon became apparent that they were headed for harbour.

They had thirty miles to go by the plot. We were about eighteen miles from the point where we must intercept them. We could not leave the noisy boat alone off the enemy coast; noise or not, we had to take a chance.

We sped away. The sea was windless, undulating gently. The night clear and dark. They must have heard us, but the E-boats would be here in half an hour. Maybe they thought we were E-boats! So we encouraged our hopes, as we donned our tin hats. It was the ideal place for a scrap. Smooth water, plenty of sea room, no shore batteries to protect them this time. Only one thing worried us. David James was aboard my boat, and David had a hoodoo. He had been with us from the first, had done as many operations of every type as anyone, yet he had never made contact with the enemy. Always something happened to avert action if David was there, however likely the set up. The next day, with David's boat laid up, a fierce fight would result from

the most unpromising situation. It was quite uncanny, and it was beginning to get him down.

He thought the spell was to be broken this time. The E-boats would be on us in less than fifteen minutes now. Tension increased. I walked round the silent ship, admonishing the gunners to hold their fire until the range was closed to the minimum. Final touches, the last preparations for battle, were made. Time passed. No sound, no distant mutter or soft-swish. They must have slowed. Something was wrong. Why were they not here yet?

My suspicions deepened. We started up and roared along the coast. Just what I had begun to fear. The harbour lights were on; the E-boats must have been entering or already in. The shore had heard us coming. Quickly they had warned the E-boats by W/T.

The "Hammers of Hell" had done their stuff, and David's hoodoo had triumphed again.

The night produced nothing more memorable than David's remark about benzedrine. The doctor had been keen to try the effect of two tablets of benzedrine on us. It was reputed to keep away sleep and pep you up. David was a great and notorious zizzer. To zizz is naval slang for to sleep. On this occasion he had tried two tablets. Returning home in the morning, he remarked:

"I don't think much of benzedrine. I felt just as cowardly as ever and went hard a-zizz by midnight."

For the last six weeks we had been lucky. We felt rather proud of ourselves, and we had a new confidence. I had loved and trusted my boats six weeks ago, but with a half timid, expectant love, the least bit apologetic. The same feeling that I had felt for my Aston-Martin, as, overhauled, tuned, personally and completely reassembled, burnished, polished, I drove her tenderly along the straight, impersonal, sun-baked French roads to her first race.

Now my feelings for the boats were similar to the familiar trusting affection for my car, with which I had returned from that gruelling twenty-four hours at Le Mans; true, she was running on three cylinders only, her brakes were a thing of the past, she was no longer burnished and polished, but every touch

of the steering wheel was a caress, every pressure of the throttle pedal an intimate contact.

Now the boats and I understood one another, and with that understanding comes true affection, not to replace but to supply a proper pride. I knew what they could do for us. I realized that when I was calling for special efforts, efforts that might anger and hurt; I recognized when I was asking for too much.

AT BEEHIVE WE HAD NOW a somewhat depleted flotilla. Bailey had had a fierce engagement not long before. A merchant ship had been hit and Bailey had wound up the show by going bald-headed for a flak trawler and depth-charging her. It was an extremely gallant affair. The trawler had been well and truly dealt with, but not before she had wreaked bitter vengeance on Bailey's boat, during her close-in attack. Several of the crew were killed, nearly all on the upper deck wounded, including Bailey himself—in the bottom. This, though it inconvenienced him considerably, mercifully did not incapacitate him, and he succeeded in subduing a fire while the boat careered madly along, unsteered, weaving her way drunkenly. In the end, he just got her back to harbour half-full of water forward. A merciful Providence had decreed that the engines should be undamaged and reliable to the end. Not so one of her consorts. In the same engagement she had received an unlucky shot that put her engines out of action. Clouds of steam issued from the hatch, and amidst them, the face of White, her motor mechanic, who quietly murmured the memorable remark:

“Curtains, sir,”

to his anxious C.O. Fortunately he managed to get an engine going and she tottered home to fight another day.

Our next fight came soon after this.

The particular form of trouble that we were looking for was a patrol of four flak trawlers that we knew to be stationed in a certain vicinity.

Presently we sighted ships. It is hard to convey the thrill of such a moment. To know that the enemy is near, that you can

intercept, that he is unaware of the surprise in store for him. The stealthy tracking down, the gunboats stealing along, subdued, held in leash, in close line ahead. The first glimpse of black shapes, blacker than the surrounding darkness.

"Enemy red 45."

The tensely awaited signal! To kill, or be killed. A situation stimulating and logical in its simplicity. The gunners had had it explained to them. That was a grim satisfaction. I heard my French-polisher, the gunner, mutter, "Let's have a poke at 'em," as he put his safety catches to fire and squared off his gun. That was another satisfaction.

There were two hulls visible at first, out ahead of anything else, heading for the land, now less than two miles distant. We closed, gathering speed. A blue light flashed, challenging us. They challenged again, and yet a third time. That was all we wanted. We were right in close by now, about two hundred yards, where we could not miss these slow-moving solid hulls. Then the guns spoke.

In the event it turned out to be a small convoy. Due to the fact that we intercepted it so close to the harbour mouth, the merchant vessels were ahead of the escort trawlers, and we were able to wreak much havoc before they came up and the action became less one-sided. We disengaged fifteen minutes later with a number of holes in our boats, a few minor casualties, and three guns still working, but cheerful and well pleased with ourselves. The enemy had been considerably damaged, and remarkably scared. They always hated it when they thought they were as good as home.

My boat had been hit several times, and I fancied some had been in the engineroom. I sent for Stay. A face appeared, covered in blood and oil, unrecognizable until the familiar words came:

"Top line, sir. One of the oil tanks is stuffed up with rag, and I had to plug one of the exhaust pipe jackets. But she'll be all right."

Some motor mechanics could be worth their weight in gold. A shell had exploded in the engineroom, slightly wounding

Stay in the face, puncturing one of the oil tanks and putting a hole in an exhaust pipe jacket. With jets of intensely hot oil and sea water pouring over him, Stay had promptly plugged both holes and kept the engines running without a falter.

In less than a month we were to have another engagement and suffer our first serious loss. In the meanwhile the weather was rough. It was the time of the equinoctial gales, and operations were few. Nevertheless I went through a most alarming period.

I received warning, a hint only, that the authorities were looking for an officer to teach gunboat tactics at the working-up base, and that my name was seriously considered.

I investigated matters and found that it was all too true. I was only too willing to help in developing and teaching tactics, but my view was that I could best do that by remaining at sea and passing on ideas, experiments and lessons learnt, to a whole-time shore authority. I felt that if I went ashore I should soon be out of date, tactics developed so fast; that after a short time I should lack confidence in my ability to teach seagoing S.Os. I should feel that they knew more than I did. My experience in fast gunboats was of value at sea, where I could try out new ideas and continue development. Besides, from the personal point of view, I had just got a flotilla fully worked up, of which I was very proud, and it would be bitter to have to leave them.

At first it seemed that the authorities would not see my point of view. I went through a nerve-racking ten days. To be on the beach. To see my boats put to sea knowing that perhaps never again would I lead them. Never again to feel the lift and dance of the hulls as we headed for the enemy coast. Never again to feel a unit wheel at a word of command. With the war continuing, never again to feel the exhilarating anxiety of real responsibility at sea, the power of life and death, your brains against the enemy's, with wounds and death as the stakes.

It was unbearable. I wrote a letter explaining succinctly my views and my unsuitability for a teaching job. It worked. To my intense relief the appointment went elsewhere.

About this time the B.B.C. descended upon us. They were preparing a Trafalgar Day broadcast, and required a short

recording of our boats; the C.Os. being briefed, boats leaving harbour, the roar of the engines. We had great fun slamming doors to indicate our departure, scrabbling across gravel for the benefit of a creeping microphone, jumping repeatedly aboard: "There goes the S.O.," and rehearsing a delightful little sequence of slipping orders.

We took the B.B.C. expert for a high-speed trip in order to obtain the necessary roar of engines. He liked it so much we had to go out and do it again, as he had forgotten to say his piece under way.

This noise business was a bit of a disappointment to us. We took a lot of trouble in the matter. Secretly we had high hopes of bursting the microphone! We took out a unit, including the "Hammers of Hell," and increased our blood pressure not a little in an endeavour to get the exhausts within a few yards of the end of the pier on which the mike was placed, at the same time avoiding a nearby buoy, all at full speed. The result was described as admirable by ear witnesses.

Our disappointment can be imagined, therefore, when we listened in on Trafalgar Day and heard a sound rather like an attenuated two-stroke motor-bike. No doubt the real way to achieve the stirring cacophony of our powerful engines would have been the active turning of a sewing machine!

One of the B.B.C. men asked an M.T.B. first lieutenant, an outspoken individual called Henry Franklin, whether, when the men were running down to man the boats, it would be appropriate to record some such remarks as: "Look out, Hitler, here we come!" in conformity with Air Force films where the pilot invariably remarks: "Stuttgart, here we come!" or some such exhortation.

Franklin replied that it would be quite incorrect, but that a matelot, recently roused from a sound sleep, might be heard to mutter:

"Bloody bastards!"

Needless to say this was not recorded, which seems to me rather a pity.

Why not give broadcasts a touch of real life? It would cheer people up a lot. Anybody properly alive to-day must know that

sailors invariably use such words. Anybody except children, and does it matter for them? The point is debatable.

My small boys have been brought up on a farm and have heard from their infancy a choice and oft-repeated selection of well-known British oaths.

I very much doubt if they are any the worse for this. In fact probably it is a good thing. They take them as a matter of course now, wherever they hear them, which may be anywhere, and so take no notice. Surely this is the best thing for children, who must eventually come across swearing? Far better than the secret, undercover introduction to oaths that is usually a boy's lot.

I can still remember the half-ashamed, half-thrilled way in which I first heard the sailor's ordinary expletive. In this way they have a much more profound and unnecessary psychological effect upon the child. It would be far better if the B.B.C. sometimes called a spade a spade, or if dealing with the matelot, a bloody spade. It would have the hall-mark of truth. John Citizen would sit up and listen.

On the evening of the 2nd October we set out on patrol. The old moon would rise at 1.30 in the morning.

It was a beautiful night with a gentle south-easterly wind off shore for our purposes, just as it should be.

All went according to plan except that we were a little late. A hump-backed moon was riding low in the heavens. It was a fascinating scene to watch. The white-grey hulls glimmering dully in the faint moonlight, their straight stems throwing up a feather spray of water at their creeping gait. The sharp orders intoned at intervals.

We reckoned there was probably a trawler patrol a short distance away to the north-east. I slipped into the wheelhouse to study the chart. If the dustbin was the head of the ship containing her eyes and brains, the wheelhouse was her heart, the source of life and energy. Some oilskins, hanging against the side, swayed gently to the quiet movement of the boat. Her heart was beating, there was life here, apparent in every rustle and creak. A ship is only dead, really dead, in dry dock or hoisted ashore. Then her gear hangs still and listless, even the softest slap and

ripple of the sea is absent, animation seems suspended, her heart stopped, until life returns upon renewed contact with the water.

I put my elbows on the edge of the chart table, head in hands, and contemplated the position. We should be going north-east, the moon would be on our starboard bow. The distance being short, we could afford to proceed at low speed. If the enemy were there we should have every chance of surprising them.

The decision was taken. We had had a run of successes without serious loss. Though this may have induced over-confidence, I had enough sense to see that surprise had been the decisive factor throughout. On every occasion, except one battle where we had not decisively damaged the E-boats, but had turned them from their purpose by sheer hard fighting, the object had been obtained as a result of complete tactical surprise. It must always be so in our type of warfare. Fighting at night, generally against vastly superior and more powerfully-armed vessels, ourselves extremely vulnerable, the lightning thrust was our chance. Catch the enemy on his heels, go for him bald-headed, hit him hard and quickly, then get out. That was how to make war with our little ships. Stab him again and again with rapier thrusts. To increase the effective weight of those thrusts was our continual concern. By the summer of 1942 we had a boat that had a sting which would have seemed incredible to our eager eyes in the early days, when a bare two years before we swept the seas with nothing but our .303 automatic guns.

They say that pride goes before a fall. Maybe I was overconfident with our recent success. You shall judge for yourselves. Certain it is that I was about to have it brought home to me in forceful manner that good luck, the supreme importance of which I had always maintained, was at least as vital an element as surprise in the attainment of victory at sea. We were heading for our first serious loss.

"We'll see if we can find those trawlers up north, and have a pop at them. Start up." My voice carried easily in the gentle night breeze.

The boats got under way, bumping off at cruising speed.

We swept up the coast, the moon, riding high now, fine on our starboard bow. Visibility was good. It would be possible to see our quarry quite a mile away, possibly further.

Boffin was with me. I was standing on the canopy top scanning ahead steadily through glasses. We had always sought out the enemy and attacked, and so far all had gone well. But there was an uneasiness lurking in the back of my mind. Surprise was essential on bigger ships, such as trawlers. Could we effect it in this bright moonlight and good visibility? If not an attack would be wrong. The risk would be too high for the possible benefit. But the flotilla always attacked! Commonsense and experience were at variance with inclination.

Nevertheless I decided that unless I could surprise them and cause a diversion I would not allow an attack to be pressed home close. The men might even have to see the enemy pass by unmolested. A bitter experience, but in this warfare conditions must be selected in order to achieve success.

Thinking thus, suddenly I saw them. First one small black blob in the moonpath, then another. I held my peace and watched. There was another and yet a fourth. Thirty seconds more and I was sure that was all. I slipped down from the canopy.

"There they are, bearing green 20, four of them," I said quietly to Boffin.

So far so good. We were in a perfect position. The enemy approaching slowly, on a course to pass us a few cables to starboard. They were in line abreast doing about four knots. I was up again on the canopy, watching intently, thinking furiously. Down moon, well camouflaged as we were, they would not see us until they were a few cables away. We could give them a good dose of gunfire, but that would not be decisive. We could not get one separated in that close formation and good visibility. Should we try out our much discussed and practised depth-charge attack, where we had tactical surprise, as on this occasion?

Here was a chance to try out our oft-discussed plans. The trouble was the moonlight and good visibility. Such an attack needed conditions of darkness and low visibility if possible, then the single attacking boat could not be seen until very close.

To-night, if unlucky, she might be sighted at several cables and have to run the gauntlet going in.

I looked down moon. It was surprisingly difficult to see our little boats in the toneless obscurity. With a well-sustained diversion there should be every chance of the attacking boat getting right in unobserved. We should never get a better chance of carrying out such an attack.

Had we not always attacked before? With a bit of luck we should get one of them. Luck! The fickle jade had been on our side too long. How was I to know that she was absent to-night?

The enemy were drawing steadily nearer. Time was short. Who should make the attack? Thoughts raced through my mind. My first reaction was to do it myself. A bare two months before I had carried out a successful depth-charge attack. My boat had been smitten, but then there had been no diversion. We were the most suitable, the most experienced. But the limelight had consequently fallen all too brightly upon us and me in particular; the resultant acclamations embarrassing so far as I was concerned. I desperately wanted my other officers to share to the full in the flotilla's success. They were all so grand, willing to do anything. George Duncan I knew to be pining for an opportunity. He had kicked himself for days after one of our recent actions. He had been last in the line, the best position for breaking off and delivering a depth-charge attack at the C.O.'s. own initiative. The first trawler attacked had been well subdued. George considered that he could have seized the opportunity and finished her off with a depth-charge. I knew this had been on his mind, that he was dead keen for his chance to make up for the opportunity he considered he had missed.

Thus swiftly I reasoned, as the black shapes of the enemy loomed larger and clearer. After the event I taxed myself bitterly. Why had I not undertaken the attack myself? Had not fear, personal fear, fear for my own wretched body played its part in the decision? With George gone and myself unhurt and in comfort at home, such reaction was inevitable. The great advantage of naval warfare, especially our small ship fighting, was that as

leader one shared to the full the risks and hardships of every member of the flotilla. Mercifully absent was the terrible responsibility, so often inherent in military commands, of ordering others to the attack whilst remaining oneself in comparative security. Had I funked it on this occasion? Had I sent another man in because, even subconsciously, I had feared for my own life? Later the thought tortured me. I have tried to analyse precisely my feelings at the time. Confident as I was then, possibly over-confident, I do not think that anxiety for the result, either for George or for me, consciously affected my decision.

"Would you like to carry out the attack, George?" I shouted. I knew the question to be superfluous. Nothing would hold George back.

"Yes, I would," came the unhesitating reply. A very brave man was started on the short run to swift death.

Details were settled. We were to attack on the beam, work round up moon, slowly extending the range, leaving the down moon side clear for George's attack, which was to be delivered as soon as possible after we had got the fight well under way.

We were on the trawlers' beam now, about four cables distant. Their course was south-west, the moon bore east. Three of our boats, including George's, crept away moving through west to south and south-east, closing and turning slowly on opposite courses to the enemy.

They were less than three cables away now, large as life, the moon path just astern. Still they did not see us. Two cables off, they challenged us. It was time to start. A stream of tracer swept from the gunboats into the nearest trawler. Slowly at first, rather hesitantly, the answering fire gathered momentum, each trawler in turn becoming alive to the situation. We increased speed and circled round the stern of the enemy, slowly opening range as we became silhouetted against the moon and their fire improved, maintaining a steady barrage of tracer.

Minutes went by, still no sign of George's boat. She was slow. I had expected her attack soon after we had become fully engaged. We had hit that first trawler hard, the others in varying degree; we were being hit ourselves from time to time, but most

was passing wide, the tracer seeming to flare out and up at you like a projected flame, the near bullets whistling shrilly.

It was not until we had worked round to the south-east of the enemy that a sudden eruption of tracer from the trawler in a south-westerly direction indicated that George had gone in. Up to then all their fire had been directed towards us. This burst of tracer was at right angles to the general direction of their shooting. Short sustained, it was immediately followed by a violent criss-cross of tracer; evidently George was firing back and being fired on more heavily. This again was only momentary, lasting at the most for a minute or two. Then silence.

We had ceased fire at the sign of George's attack. We drew away down moon, passing across the trawlers' line of advance. Suddenly I noticed a patch of mist. I remembered then that a peculiar obscurity had been developing round the moon during the engagement. Was there a fog coming up? This was the first real indication of it.

Using glasses, I could watch the enemy about half a mile away, without fear of them seeing us. They were stopped now, huddled together in a bunch, a cloud of black smoke hanging over them. George's attack had been a success by the look of it. It seemed that they were standing by one of their number. If only we had torpedoes, what an opportunity! Stopped in a close group!

At that moment the fog came down in real earnest, blotting them out. I turned my attention to George. All seemed to have gone well. He had evidently got in unobserved. This was evident from the momentary nature of the engagement. By the same token he had got out again quickly.

Had he suffered severely and been slowed up, the cross-fire would have been prolonged. At the worst he would have been stopped or set on fire; either eventuality would have been obvious.

It seemed that all was well. Good old George! Of one thing I was sure: the attack had been pressed home to the limit. To within a few feet of the enemy's sharp rising bow.

We called him up by W/T. No answer. That was nothing. It was rare that one of our boats, delivering a determined attack



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LIEUT.-COMMANDER ROBERT HICHENS, D.S.O., D.S.C.

and suffering some damage, was able to use her wireless again. More often than not the aerial was shot away, the set itself damaged or the power supply cut off.

We sped shorewards, searching for him, but found nothing.

Viewed in the light of later knowledge this was a disaster. At the time we were comparatively unconcerned. We had no reason to suppose that he was in dire distress. We thought his W/T was out of action.

We stopped, and in the ensuing silence, listened. There was nothing to be heard except the faintest bumble to the north and north-east. If that was George, he was going strong and a good way off. If he were in trouble we would hear his engines near by, or his guns. So we thought. There was nothing.

We listened intently. The trawlers could be heard intermittently to the south, stopping and starting, maintaining the same bearing. Evidently they were moving around slowly in the same position, further evidence of their discomfiture.

A signal came through. It was from Harpy Lloyd, who was investigating the coast ten miles to the north of us, with a unit of M.T.Bs. It told us that he was in touch with two E-boats, giving the position.

A quick look at the chart showed them to be just north of the Hook. Exactly what we had been praying for. Blast this fog!

We bumbled north as fast as the fog would allow. It got worse. Off the coast it was an impenetrable blanket. It was hopeless. We could find nothing in this. We stopped in the hope that we might hear something. Nothing! The silence of the grave!

Soon it would begin to dawn. We began to creep out, to head for home. A few miles clear of the land the fog vanished as if by magic.

With little to go on I was, nevertheless, worrying about George. Something intuitive, unreasoning, hammered at the back of my brain. Anxiety, unwelcome, unbidden, was there.

Here was an opportunity to continue the search.

"We'll nip back to the scene of the action," I said to Boffin. "It's only twelve miles; we can just do it before dawn. If by any chance he went gash around there, he'll hear us."

This we did, without success. Just before first light we finally turned for home, mentally satisfied. If they were in trouble there they must have heard us.

We roared home across the North Sea in the slowly gathering light of a grey dawn.

"I expect we'll meet George at the Sink," said Boffin.

"Just about," I replied. But still there was that gnawing anxiety at the back of my head.

We tied up at the quay. No, George had not got in yet. We gave details of the fight. We had breakfast, baths. Shaved and dressed, I met Boffin again.

"I expect he went gash in one engine," I said. "He wouldn't be in for another two hours in that case."

"That's about it," Boffin replied.

Two hours later there was still no news. We went to S.O.O's. office to see if they had heard anything. Nothing.

"Or maybe his remaining engine packed up on the way over," I said to Boffin.

But we could not conceal from each other the anxiety in our eyes.

"Could he have hit a mine on his way home, do you think?" I said.

"There's always a chance," said Boffin.

The minor casualties and damage in the other boats was forgotten, unimportant in the increasing anxiety.

An aircraft search was instituted without result. Our gloom deepened. In the afternoon we laid plans for our own search. They might have hit a mine or be near the enemy coast still, though the chances of finding them were low.

The 6th flotilla searched the western half of the return journey. We swept the eastern half, ending by quartering the scene of the action. No reply except star shell, flares and tracer from the nearby coast.

In the early morning we headed sadly for home. There was nothing more we could do.

Bitterly I taxed myself for not having delivered the depth charge attack myself. In the increasing westerly wind, keeping

watch alone in the dustbin, I communed with myself. Forlorn and self-tormenting was my mood. Though I could not reconstruct what had happened, something impelled me to bid "Good-bye" to George. In my mood of self-abasement, it seemed unforgivable that it was he and not I. It seemed that by not being killed or captured with him I had let my friend down.

George had been straight and simple and brave. So full of life, so keen on his job. Of all people that I knew Conrad's praise of the Anglo Saxon male seemed most applicable to him. "A man of courage, initiative and hardihood, yet so little stained by the excesses of many virtues."

We could not construct an adequate theory as to the loss of George's boat. The short outburst of firing, the fact that the boat appeared to have disengaged satisfactorily, the lack of any attempt to attract our attention: how to reconcile these observations with her non-appearance? Had she hit the trawler, or a sweep perhaps? If so we must have seen something of it at the time. Had she been hit in the engineroom and stopped? If so, surely she would have been able to attract our attention.

The only thing that I am quite certain of is that George pressed home his attack to the limit and with success. No man could have engaged the enemy more closely, the Navy's time-honoured endeavour. Thus he died.

Kelly turned up at the end of the morning's work and suggested a visit to his ship.

When I arrived, there was old Perry, looking more venerable than ever ensconced in the far corner, clearly the first to arrive and the last to leave, and on the locker tops was assembled the most astonishing selection of bottles. Six bottles of gin, six of rum, six of whisky, and lo and behold! even six of brandy! It made you feel cheerful just to see the rows of bottles, and Kelly was much commended on his zeal and general spirit of social welfare by all and sundry. He had evidently just received a new

consignment. The proper allowance was twelve bottles of spirits per boat per month, so everybody was inquiring how he had managed twenty-four bottles. Kelly's laconic reply was, "Two month's supply." But no one believed that he could have gone dry for a month or made twelve bottles last for two, so he was given the benefit of the doubt and paid every possible respect.

His Number 1, Crossley, was seated, like Madame at a French estaminet, with a bottle in either hand.

"Have a Mark VIII C, sir."

"What's the C for?" I queried.

"A dash of brandy; a definitely sound and progressive modification." (This from Perry who was already in possession of a large one.)

There were three New Zealanders present, Johnny Mallite, his No. 1, Duffell-Interman, and the M.L.'s. navigator, Bradley. Also Harpy's No. 1, Saunders, and David James.

As usual the conversation started with shop.

"It's time my boat was slipped," said Mallite, "she's heavy as lead, you can feel how sluggish she is. She's only been up once in her whole distinguished career."

"Can't you hold her up till the 20th December, she'll be all right till then?" This from Duffell-Interman.

"As her first lieutenant, I realize you are an interested party," I said, "but I expect you'll find that David has booked seats for the ballet about then."

"No I haven't. I've had leave at home for the last three years at Christmas, and I want to have a proper service Christmas this time. I'm aiming at about the 20th January."

I turned to Bradley and explained:

"You see David has very effective methods of fixing his leave dates. He books seats at the ballet, and then if he's not allowed to go he sulks and gets intoxicated!"

Cries of "Shame!" from David.

Cowley roused himself at this, took a suck at his pipe and said:

"Anyway you never have need of any leave, sir. I understand you're off to London to-morrow again to see the King."

"Yes, with Harpy and Dickens. Can I give him any message for you?"

There were various suggestions for enlisting Royal assistance, none very relevant. Cowley took another suck at his pipe and added:

"I suppose when your boat goes down in a few days' time she'll have a little emblem on her wheelhouse and the inscription 'By Appointment to H.M. The King!'"

When the uproar subsided, Mallite told Cowley that that would do for him, and he could have the afternoon off, and the party settled down to more serious topics.

"I hope we see George before too long."

Needless to say news had not as yet been received from Germany. We were still very hopeful.

"If we're lucky, six months or a year."

"I give it five years." This from Bradley.

At this there was a general chorus of dissension. Then someone started on the evergreen subject of our political leaders. These men knew something from personal experience of the state of preparedness of this country at the time of Dunkirk. They remembered how, for a year and a half after Dunkirk, they were expected to seek out and fight E-boats with gunboats, armed only with .303s against the E-boats' 20 mm. guns. They observed that, with the exception of Mr. Churchill and very few others, the same men were still in power. These men, like all the other fighting services, did their job. But they are damned if they have done it to keep in power the incompetent muddlers who brought the war on through their criminal deception of the public. They have seen friends tabled, and others reprimanded and displaced for small failures of efficiency in difficult and dangerous work (as they must be) and they want to know why incompetence at the top goes unpunished. There is a growing demand for inquiry and impeachment amongst the young men.

"Ought to take a couple of Tommy-guns into the House, after the war, and say 'Git'," said Mallite.

There was a general chorus of approval.

"Revolution's no good," said David. "Nothing has ever been effected by it or by bloodshed."

"What about Russia?"

"Well, it would be no good in England. Our way is to move slowly but surely. That's the true meaning of the Conservative Party, to conserve the best of what we've got and get progress."

"Yes, but the end of this war," I said, "should be a great opportunity for a big step forward. Only, somehow, the country has got to get into the House men who will put the country as a whole before party or self-interest."

"It isn't possible." This from Bradley, who seemed to have rather less faith in human nature than even Mallite. "They'll always be got at."

"We've got to have honesty at the top, otherwise we're done, or anyway our children are. Look at what has happened to us through the deliberate deception of the public by Baldwin, Ramsay Mac., Chamberlain and Co., and their satellites. You've only got to read *All Our To-morrows*, Douglas Reed's book, to have it brought home. He certainly lets 'em have it. He asks openly who are the Fifth Columnists, still in power now, who were waiting to do a Laval after Dunkirk. As he says, they were either impossibly stupid and incompetent, or traitors, whichever it was. There must be a full inquiry and they must go, and somehow we must get honest men."

"But how?" from Cowley.

"Well, the way I look at it is this. You can only judge of a man's incorruptibility and decency by viewing his record in life. What better way of judging him than to observe what he has done or tried to do, or how he has behaved during the past four years. Would you rather vote for a chap who'd done his stuff in this war or for a chap who's grown fat on it?"

No one answered; silence was the most comprehensive reply.

"Well, why shouldn't a new party be formed, called the War Party, or what you will? You'd have to have a well-chosen committee whose job it would be to select candidates in each constituency. The selection would be based on the general suitability of the chaps, but great emphasis would have to be

laid on how far the individual could be trusted to put the country first, how far he is prepared to sacrifice himself for its welfare, and this would largely be judged by what the man had done during the war. He must have served wholeheartedly, not necessarily by fighting, but genuine service to the country as opposed to self.

"If it was well done, I believe it would sweep the country. You'd obviously make some mistakes, but on the whole you'd get a decent and determined set of men.

"Then once they were in, they would have to be absolutely ruthless within the limits of the constitution to break the money power or armaments power, or whatever it is that seems to lead to our lamentable lack of principle in high office."

"How you do run on!" Cowley lifted a bottle. "Have another Mark VIII?"

"No thanks. Lunch-time."

"What's the leave?"

"1730, crews aboard at 1800, we slip at 1830."

Everyone crowded up the hatch and dispersed on the dock-side. I was walking with David James.

"We really agree in principle," I said. "We both believe in conserving what we've got and getting honesty within the constitution, and a free vote to Members on almost all matters. But you know more of the practical difficulties than I do. I dream of fine schemes for getting the right men in, and you see more clearly that the best thing to do is peg away and try to make the best of what we've got."

"Yes. Attach oneself to an existing party and get all the men with the right ideas together and try to put them over that way."

"Well, we're stupid to worry. Time enough when we know that we have avoided the perils of the sea and the pitfalls of the enemy."

POSTSCRIPT



Lieutenant-Commander Hichens's story ends here. He fought many actions that he did not live to write about. On the 13th April, 1943, after a minor engagement with the enemy had been broken off, he was killed by a last stray shell. He had won the Distinguished Service Order and bar, the Distinguished Service Cross and two bars, and he was three times mentioned in despatches.

OFFICIAL ADMIRALTY COMMUNIQUÉ.

No. 826

On each of the last two nights, light coastal forces have had short, sharp engagements with enemy patrol craft close to the Dutch coast.

As a result of these engagements considerable damage has been caused to the enemy craft and many casualties must have been inflicted on their personnel.

During the course of last night's engagement it is regretted that Lieutenant-Commander Robert Peverell Hichens, D.S.O., D.S.C., R.N.V.R., was killed. The other casualties sustained during these two nights were two officers and two ratings wounded. The next of kin have been informed.

All our ships returned safely to harbour.

ADMIRALTY, S.W.I.

13th April, 1943.

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